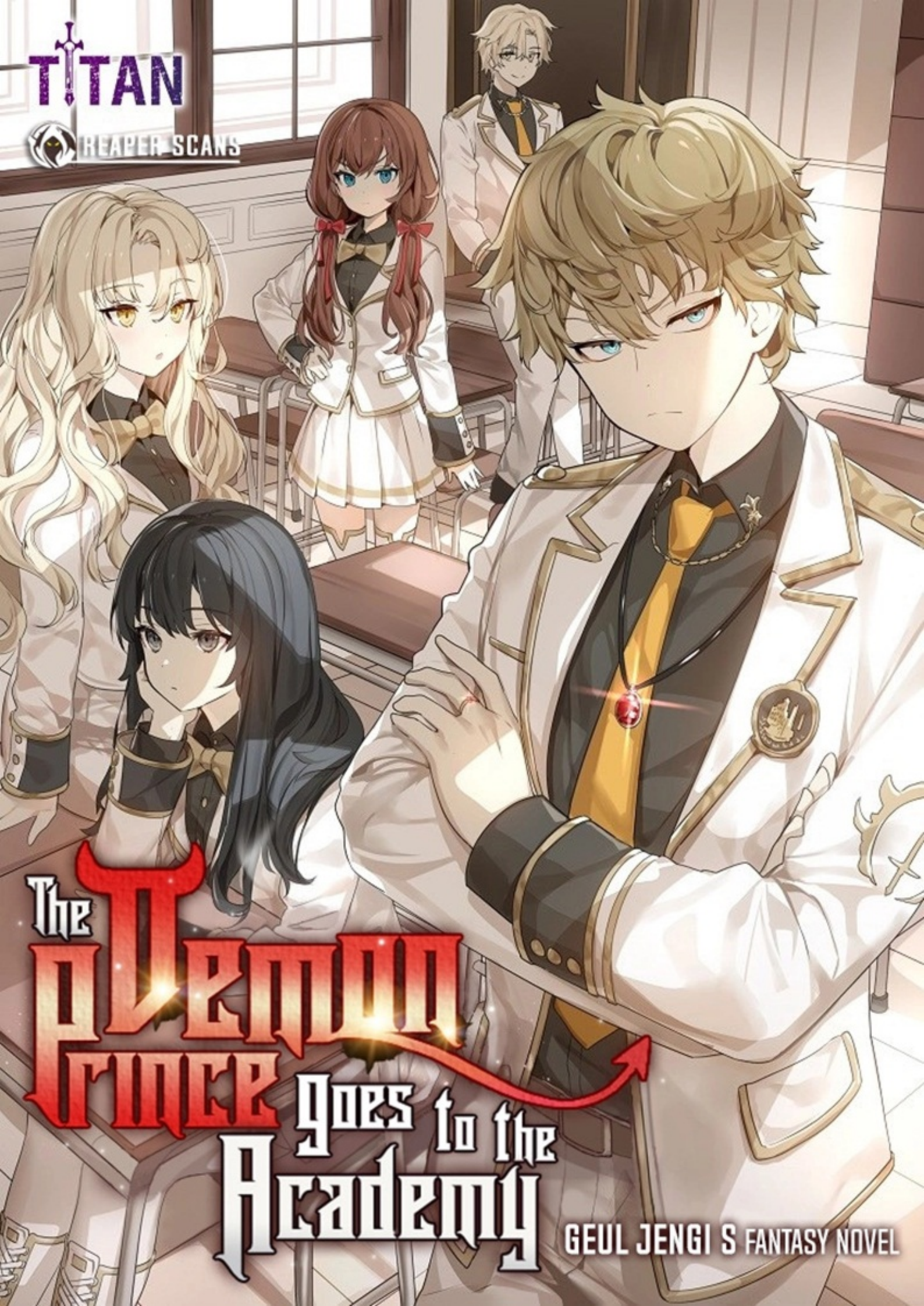
TITAN
REAPER SCANS
The Demon Prince goes to the Academy
GEUL JENGI S FANTASY NOVEL

THE DEMON PRINCE GOES TO THE ACADEMY

– 마왕은 학원에 간다 –

- VOLUME 11 -

-AUTHOR-

Geul Jengi S

-ILLUSTRATOR-

RONOPU

[SUBUDAI11]

CHAPTER 501

Soon, I arrived at Port Mokna.

My mind was cluttered. I wondered what I should say when I meet Liana, and whether the purification and exorcism work was progressing well.

There were many things to ask and confirm.

However, upon arrival, the atmosphere in Port Mokna felt not just calm, but ominously so.

"It seems there's been a problem."

"It does look that way."

An unusually large number of soldiers were standing on the walls.

As if they were preparing for battle.

And, whether it was a sign from the spirits or something else, I couldn't tell, but a sinister premonition ran down my spine, making my skin tingle.

I quickly jumped up the wall in a single bound.

"Your Highness, the Demon King…"

"Rein… Hardt?"

Not only soldiers but also Liana, with a grave expression on her face, were standing on the wall.

She seemed not to have expected my arrival at this time, and her expression was a mix of confusion and guilt.

"What's going on?"

"I… I don't know… I really don't know…”

Liana's face had turned pale.

In a field outside Port Mokna.

Near the horizon, someone was walking towards us in the moonlight.

Staggering and swaying.

Covered in blood, wearing a magnificent priest's robe.

With both hands drenched in blood, I wondered what she had done.

As if possessed by something, Olivia approached Port Mokna from the horizon.

"What is… this…”

Olivia, who had left to exorcise evil spirits and vengeful ghosts, now approached Port Mokna as if her mind had been overwhelmed by something.

From her entire body, an eerie aura flowed out like steam.

Olivia possessed the ability of a sacred mind.

She had a considerable innate resistance to supernatural interference or disturbance, at least as far as I knew.

However, even Olivia seemed to be controlled by something.

It was clear that her ability didn't provide complete immunity. Was this vengeful spirit powerful enough to suppress even Olivia's mind?

Witnessing Olivia's pitiful return, staggering and swaying after taking on the task of exorcism and purification, the soldiers on the wall seemed to be feeling an eerie sense of terror.

I couldn't tell exactly what had happened.

However, Olivia was evidently under the control of something.

Liana stared at the scene, her expression hardened.

Had the other holy knights and priests who went with her died?

By Olivia's hand?

"I'll handle this. No one interfere."

"Alright."

At my blunt command, Liana nodded her head with a serious expression.

Leaping off the wall, I walked towards Olivia, who was approaching from the horizon.

With her eyes clouded, Olivia soon raised her head and looked at me.

Her eyes regained focus.

Though far away, I couldn't help but immediately recognize the emotions in her gaze.

A twisted face.

Trembling lips.

Fear.

Anger.

Hatred.

Only negative emotions were visible.

From Olivia's body, which now showed clear contempt and hatred towards me, a dark energy began to boil.

Olivia had mastered the power of Tu'an, the god of purity.

Although she didn't use it often, she had also mastered the opposite power, that of Kier.

Having been consumed by a vengeful spirit that was already dead, was she now using the power of corruption?

Her body wrapped in pitch-black energy, Olivia took a step forward.

When had she been staggering?

With a powerful stride, Olivia charged at me.

Leaping an incredible distance, Olivia leaps once more.

With movements akin to a beast, Olivia charges toward me in an instant.

My first real battle since becoming a Master-class.

I never imagined it would be against Olivia, who's possessed by vengeful spirits, rather than any other monster.

What happened to Olivia?

Can she return to her senses?

Can I make that happen?

Confused as I am,

I have spent a long time honing the ability to find unwavering resolve amidst fear and confusion.

My mind may be in disarray, but my heart settles down.

What I need to do right now,

Subduing the berserk Olivia.

There's nothing else I should be concerned about at the moment.

"Huuu…”

I regulate my breathing.

I calm my mind and focus.

I control and refine the flow of my mana, compressing the leaking mana to the utmost limit.

Compressing and compressing,

I use it nowhere else but to enhance my physical strength.

As Olivia, her arms dyed in pitch-black darkness, rushes toward me like a beast and stretches out her arms, I deflect them with my bare hands.

-Clang!

Along with an eerie sound of arms colliding,

"Such a vile spirit…”

"Kuuh…!"

"How dare you touch her."

I deliver a powerful blow to Olivia's vital point.

-Thud!

With a single punch, Olivia is sent flying like a rock, tumbling dozens of times across the field with a heavy impact.

I can't use my sword.

Because I can't kill Olivia.

"Kuuhhhhhhh…”

After being thrown a considerable distance, Olivia staggers back to her feet.

It was an attack meant to knock her out; should I have hit her harder?

"Kk…"

Covering her face with one hand, Olivia begins to emit muffled groans.

"Kk-hu… Hu… Huk… Kk-huk-huk…"

It's a bizarre cry.

Bright red tears flow from Olivia's eyes.

Is it the pain of the vengeful spirits controlling her?

Or the pain of unwillingly fighting against me?

Or both?

Dark smoke rises from Olivia's body.

From within the smoke, figures resembling humans appear and disappear repeatedly.

So many vengeful spirits have taken root in her body that it seems unable to contain them, releasing them instead.

"Uh… Uh… Uuu…"

Olivia's appearance is pitiful, horrifying, and monstrous.

I can't tell whether it's Olivia or the spirits who are in pain.

"Uhuk… Uhuk!"

-Screeeeaaam!

-Growl!

As the black smoke emanating from Olivia's body emits loud, dissonant noises, a massive shockwave uproots the grasses of the wasteland.

-Die.

-Die.

-Die.

-Save me.

-Why me?

-I want to live.

-Uhuhuhuk…

That's not all.

The shockwave doesn't just cause gusts of wind; it also induces a strange auditory hallucination, as if tens of thousands of voices are whispering in my ears simultaneously.

It only lasted a moment.

My head.

Felt like it would burst.

As I momentarily lose my wits amidst the overwhelming whispers, Olivia reaches me.

-Crash!

As Olivia's outstretched fist strikes me, I have no choice but to be flung back several dozen meters, accompanied by a heavy impact.

-Screech.

"…”

I blocked it.

Yet, despite having blocked Olivia's punch, the area around my wrist where it struck was turning dark, as if dying.

The power of Kier, the God of Corruption.

When I killed the corrupted Riverrier Lanze, I used the fallen Tiamata to kill the one who kept regenerating his wounds.

Contaminated by the energy of corruption, Riverrier Lanze was unable to heal, and ultimately succumbed to his injuries.

Now, Olivia's attack, wielding Kier's power, aims to penetrate my mana barrier and rot my body from within.

-Ugh!

In the end, I summon Tiamata and focus divine power on the wound.

Although it is not impossible to heal, it is undeniably slow.

Kier's power suppresses Tu’an's regenerative abilities.

My wrist throbs with pain.

Olivia was always strong.

-Heh!

But now, it feels like I'm fighting not just one Olivia, but tens of thousands of enemies who hate and despise me.

The hallucinations don't stop.

The hatred, resentment, and screams of those who don't want to die assault my ears, muddling my thoughts as if they were a curse laid upon me.

I must focus on the battle.

I have to subdue Olivia.

However, I cannot hear what I need to hear.

The agonizing sensation of my hearing being paralyzed and the haunting grudge that confuses my mind feels as if it is trying to invade my very psyche, causing sudden spells of dizziness.

-Bam! Crash! Screech!

Olivia's physical onslaught does not cease either.

Her attacks, imbued with the power of corruption, penetrate my defenses and rot my body in real time.

When used in reverse, the power of Tu'an, the god of purity, becomes a massive force of corruption.

It felt like an unholy power that would burn anything it touched.

I can only withstand this onslaught because of Tiamata's power.

Perhaps, the vengeful spirits covering Olivia's body have undoubtedly enhanced both her physical capabilities and Kier's divine power.

Although Olivia's divine power is inherently strong, it was never to this extent.

-Whoosh!

"...!"

Tiamata vanishes from my hand and appears in Olivia's right hand.

Olivia and I share Tiamata.

A bizarre situation unfolds as Olivia snatches Tiamata from me.

But that's not the end.

-Rumble!

A black bolt of lightning descends from the sky, and Tiamata, which was emitting

divine power, transforms into the shape of a cursed demonic sword in an instant.

Demonic Sword Tiamata.

Olivia, wielding it, rushes towards me.

There is no time for a struggle for control using Tiamata.

-Crash!

I have no choice but to block it with my Alsbringer.

The days when Olivia was an overwhelmingly powerful warrior compared to me have passed.

I have reached the Master Class, while Olivia has not.

On top of that, I am different from others who have merely ascended to the Master Class.

With the ultimate efficiency in Magic Body Strengthening, I can produce a more potent output with the same amount of magic compared to other Master Class users.

Additionally, I possess an overwhelmingly vast amount of magic.

So, in terms of power, I am superior.

-Clang!

"Grrrrrrr…"

In the clash of swords, Olivia is pushed back, growling like a beast.

In terms of strength and output, I surpass Olivia.

The problem is not that.

"Damn it…"

The energy of decay flowing from the cursed Tiamata rots my flesh.

Is this what it feels like to die in real time?

If I were fighting an enemy wielding that power, there would be no problem.

All I would have to do is kill them before a prolonged battle. That's it.

I cannot kill Olivia, and if this drags on, my arm will eventually give out. If that happens, it's over.

Swoosh!

"Ugh…!"

And periodically, the wailing of the vengeful spirits surged like a tidal wave of pain, striking not only my ears but also my very sanity.

Physical attacks, the power of corrupted divine energy, and the curses of the souls.

An ordinary person would have gone mad or died from just one of those three types of attacks.

I cannot kill Olivia.

But if I don't, I might die.

Kill… the Demon King…

From afar, an echo from the distance carried on by the wind.

A group of shadows appeared on the horizon.

Screeeech!

Phantom horses.

Riding on phantom steeds, the knights glided across the plain.

Death knights.

They all seemed to have died not too long ago.

The dispatched Holy Knights, sent for the purification ritual, had perished.

And now, revived as death knights by the power of Olivia and the vengeful spirits.

Once, Olivia and I had struggled against a single death knight in the capital of the Levaina Kingdom, Rajeurn, where the Demon God cult had appeared.

As time passed, Olivia gained the power to create death knights herself.

But she only used that power to attack me.

Dozens of phantom horses charged toward me.

Back then, even dealing with a single one was overwhelming. Moreover, it was Olivia who had defeated the death knight, not me.

Time has passed.

Just as Olivia has grown strong enough to control death knights.

I, too, am incomparable to who I was back then, and even more so to who I was before journeying to Rezaira.

"Huff!"

Woosh!

Slash!

I severed both the phantom horse and the death knight before they could even react. The once-holy-knight of Edina, now cut into two halves, vanished in an instant.

A chilling thought crossed my mind: I was killing someone who was once an ally, for the second time.

But I wasn't just dealing with death knights.

Clash!

My true enemy was still Olivia Lanze.

Rushing from behind, Olivia's powerful kick sent me sprawling and rolling across the ground.

The impact didn't feel too severe, but the struck side of my body throbbed with pain.

The problem wasn't the impact; being in close proximity to Olivia caused corruption to spread.

Death knights charged with their eerie agility, maneuvering around.

I stood back up and gripped Alsbringer.

Alsbringer is an artifact that lends me power when facing a stronger or more numerous enemy.

I am stronger than them.

However, Alsbringer still provides power when my enemies outnumber me.

With heightened senses, I tried to figure out how to break through the strange agility of the charging phantom horses and how to subdue Olivia when, in a fleeting moment:

Flash!

Lightning illuminated the world.

Roar!

Thunder tore through the world.

Crash!

Lightning bolts rained down on the death knights.

The flesh of the recently deceased death knights burst apart, and their true bodies - their bones - began to glow red-hot and gradually turned to ash.

I turned my gaze towards the walls of Edina. Amidst despair, I saw Liana reaching out with a distorted expression on her face.

Even though they had died and been revived, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was killing my allies for the second time.

Liana seemed to feel the same way. No, her feelings seemed even more intense.

Due to her actions, she had lost the comrades she had spent a long time with and was now forced to deal with their desecrated deaths by her own hand. Despair and guilt were apparent in Liana's eyes.

CHAPTER 502

Liana was taking care of the Death Knights one by one with lightning, as if sniping them from a distance and neutralizing their power.

I told her not to interfere, but she must have thought I was in danger.

Crash! Flash!

Everyone probably thought it was because of them.

Everyone must have believed it was their fault.

Boom!

"Arrrrrrrrgh!"

Outmatched in strength, Olivia let out a beast-like scream as she was repelled by my sword.

The Death Knights charging at me were being held back by Liana.

Death Knights are top-tier undead creatures.

But so far, Liana had slaughtered countless monsters in Fort Mokna, never failing in the fort's defense even once.

So the Death Knights were also struck by the rough lightning Liana summoned, their flesh burned and reduced to mere bones, which turned a bright red and eventually turned into ash.

They may be undead, but they are still freshly deceased corpses.

Some of them still have recognizable faces.

As the leader of the Holy Order, Olivia hadn't had many direct encounters with the priests she had dispatched here.

However, Liana had commanded them for a long time, went on missions together, and spent a long time with them.

Liana would know better than anyone who she was killing for the second time.

Due to her sins, she had to summon lightning to strike her comrades' bodies dozens of times, turning the corpses, who couldn't die properly, into ashes.

Olivia had been dominated by evil spirits, and the holy knights who were sent on purification missions couldn't die properly and were resurrected as Death Knights.

They had to fight those who were once allies, not monsters from the gate.

Liana had made a mistake.

She committed an unforgivable sin.

Then what about me?

Judging intentions is a miserable endeavor.

Even if the intentions were good, even if we tried to save everyone.

In the end, it was because of me that all this happened, so is it really unfair for the vengeful spirits who hate me to possess Olivia, someone precious to me, and try to punish me?

As justified as I thought I was.

Isn't the anger of those vengeful spirits justified in its own way?

All the problems in the world would not have occurred if I didn't exist.

The hatred they have for the Demon King, the cause of everything, might not be as unfair and unjust as it seems.

Even as the Death Knights were neutralized one by one amidst the chain of lightning strikes, Olivia did not stop.

The possessed Olivia did not seem to wield her swordsmanship with reason.

"Arrrrrrrr…"

She let out a low growl like a beast, and swung her demonic sword Tiamata at me like a club.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

It wasn't difficult to block her powerful swing.

However, the problem wasn't her rough swing, but the corrupting power Olivia possessed.

Taking Tiamata from Olivia's grasp wouldn't change anything; Olivia quickly reclaimed Tiamata, only stealing the tempo of the fight.

Moreover, unlike me, Olivia could use her divine power even without Tiamata, so fighting for control was a dangerous move for me. Olivia continued to use the powers of corruption and decay even if I took Tiamata.

I could not injure Olivia, so all I could do was focus on blocking her attacks, which in turn exposed my body to the growing influence of corruption and decay.

Necrosis began spreading across my skin, and my body started to die slowly.

As my nerves died, my senses gradually dulled, and even my vision began to blur.

I could not use the healing power of Tiamata.

If this battle dragged on, I wouldn't die by the sword but instead be turned into a living mummy by the power of corruption, like a withering plant.

In the end, I had to make a decisive move.

I had to do something about the malevolent spirits that controlled Olivia.

"Grrraaaahhhhh!"

Olivia lunged at me again, wielding her sword like a wild beast.

Dodging and deflecting would only cause my body to be devoured faster.

I made my move.

-Clang!

I grabbed the blade of the corrupted Tiamata with my bare hand.

-Screech!

As if soaked in some acidic solution, white smoke rose from my clenched hand, and the skin began to die.

But I didn't just grab the sword.

-Thud!

"Ugh…”

With my other empty hand, I seized Olivia's throat.

Now, neither Olivia nor I could escape.

-Bang! Thump! Thump!

Olivia struggled to break free from my grasp, but ultimately, my physical strength was superior.

Though Olivia could devour me with the power of corruption, she could not injure me.

Tiamata belonged to both Olivia and me.

Olivia held the hilt of Tiamata, while I grasped the blade.

Since we both held a part of it, neither of us could take it away or have it taken from us.

But my body continued to die.

"Tiamata…”

Facing the Tiamata, which had been turned into a cursed sword by the will of the vengeful spirits and evil spirits controlling Olivia, I said:

"Become a holy sword."

I gave a command opposite to the one I had given when killing Riverrier Lanze.

-Flash!

Tiamata, which had been spewing dark, corrupting energy, immediately released a golden radiance and returned to its original form.

"Aaargh!"

As if the light itself caused immense pain, Olivia, still held by me, screamed in agony.

Holding the blade, not the hilt, I refused to let go of Olivia's throat as she tried to escape from the range of Tiamata's holy power.

Olivia, too, did not let go of Tiamata despite her pain.

The will to corrupt Tiamata.

The will to restore Tiamata as a holy sword.

The vengeful spirits' will clashed with mine.

-Rumble!

Tiamata, emitting both light and dark energies, stirred a fierce whirlwind in the field.

It was a battle between my single will and the countless wills of anger and resentment.

I shouldn't have been able to win.

A single will could not possibly overcome so much hatred and grudge.

Yet, I never thought of losing.

I would never let go.

Not of the massive whirlwind I had created, nor of anything else I held.

I was always prepared to let go of myself.

However, I was never prepared to let go of someone who loved me, and I had no intention of doing so.

Anyone who loved me.

Anyone I loved.

No matter who they were.

If the only way to achieve peace was to abandon someone…

I didn't need that kind of peace.

I wanted everything.

With everything in my grasp,

I would crush these cursed evils and rise again.

Gradually, it was being pushed back.

The dark energy flowing from Tiamata was slowly being forced back.

Indeed, it was being repelled.

"Ugh… Aaaahhhh!"

Watching Olivia, who was under the control of the vengeful spirits and crying out in pain, I held onto her neck so she couldn't escape.

My already dead and darkened right hand had turned black up to the wrist, but the lifeless hand, beyond my will, wouldn't let go of Olivia.

My hand?

It's just a trifle.

I can afford to lose it.

If I can reverse it.

If there's even a tiny possibility of recovering it.

I can offer more than this.

"Begone…”

To Tiamata, held in my left hand.

To the vengeful spirits that had corroded Olivia's body.

"Disappear… you wretched demons!"

I yelled, not with a wish, but with determination.

-Flash!

The world was engulfed in a red radiance, and I could finally see the spectacle of the evil spirits unable to withstand the divine power and pouring out of Olivia's body as if escaping.

-Groooowwwl!

The vengeful spirits ultimately lost the battle for control against me, and they fled to avoid being exposed to Tiamata's divine power.

The expelled spirits clustered in the air, forming a massive, dark cloud.

It floated above, huddled as if it had received a great shock, taking on a gigantic form.

Olivia lost consciousness and slumped down, and I embraced her.

Could that enormous thing have been controlling Olivia's body?

The floating mass of spirits in the air was even larger than the giant stadium I had seen at the temple.

Even for souls, could something so huge fit into a human body?

There was no way not to know what Olivia had been enduring.

How many vengeful spirits were gathered in that thing?

-Grrrrrrrrrrrr!

It was growing even larger.

As if one vengeful spirit was drawing in another.

I couldn't see ghosts with my eyes, but my keen intuition told me that its very existence was absorbing wandering spirits in the world, growing increasingly larger.

Like a black hole. The more massive the spirits, the stronger the gravitational pull they would exert on others.

The collective souls generated by Liana's massacre were only the beginning.

Now, regardless of its connection to Liana, I could only stare blankly at the increasingly massive swarm of vengeful spirits.

I could somehow expel them from Olivia's body now.

If it grew so immense that I couldn't handle it, would I be able to cope if it ran wild again afterward?

How would I deal with that?

What method could I use to handle such a massive group of vengeful spirits?

Is it even remotely feasible to subdue or purify them?

It was an overwhelming scale.

Driving them away is possible, but I couldn't purify them with the divine power I

could wield. It would have been impossible for Olivia as well.

What would happen if it tried to control someone other than Olivia?

Liana, Harriet, Charlotte, Airi.

Or if it clung to Ellen?

I would have to fight the battle I just fought again.

And by that time, the scale of those vengeful spirits would have grown even larger, so dealing with them like now might be impossible.

If it tried to kill me again by borrowing someone else's body.

Would I have to see others, wearing the same expression as Olivia did just now, trying to kill me?

Holding Olivia, I looked up at the writhing mass of vengeful spirits and said,

"Why… Why go to such lengths?"

"If you hate me, and want to kill me, why don't you just try to kill me yourselves?"

"Why are you resorting to this?"

I want to handle what I have to deal with.

I can understand their anger being justified.

So they should attack me. If those vengeful spirits attack me directly, that should be enough.

There's no need to involve the hands of those who love me in this matter.

Foolishly, or rather pointlessly, I spoke to the mass of resentment that has no reason to exist.

I have no idea how to handle this situation.

"Why…?"

But.

I heard an answer.

The massive collective of resentment sends a reply.

It's as if numerous beings are saying the same thing.

No, it was closer to a resonance than words.

With a single, simple word, echoes of countless overlapping voices spread across the field.

"You… Only if you die… Will it be enough?"

Despair and resentment filled that voice.

-Ziiing!

I could hear the souls boiling.

I could feel the emotional turmoil that could only be described that way.

"Why." "My son." "My husband." "My wife." "My siblings." "My daughter."

"Mom." "Dad." "My lord." "My love." "My friends." "My hometown."

"Our."

"Everything."

"Was taken."

"And why."

"Give back only one… Why?"

Numerous fragmented words burst out simultaneously, not entering my ears but

directly into my mind.

It couldn't be just one will. The common feeling of a collective?

As if a collective consciousness.

Those vengeful spirits resonate with each other, and with the miserable bond of hatred, rage, and despair, they become one pitiful and sinister being.

A collective called resentment.

It stares down at me from the empty sky.

The enormous vengeful spirits, like clouds, felt like they were staring at me.

I felt the resentful gaze of the countless spirits, too numerous to count.

"Because you took everything from us."

"We'll take everything from you."

"That's… fair, isn't it?"

"We'll kill you, take everything you have, destroy and annihilate it."

"Since you destroyed us."

"We also have the right to destroy you."

"Take everything."

"We have the right. To take."

I heard from Antirianus.

What Sarkegaar said to pressure Eleris right before the Gate Incident occurred.

Sarkegaar said.

Since humanity destroyed Darkland, Darkland also has the right to destroy

humanity.

The Gate Incident occurred.

In the end, the words became a boomerang that returned.

Those who were destroyed, those who were robbed, those who were killed.

I speak of the rights of those who were broken.

Only a handful of people were actually involved in this matter.

Most of the vengeful spirits before me were unrelated to almost everything happening in the world.

They didn't make any decisions, nor did they express their opinions.

They were merely sacrificed.

Even those killed by Liana's decision.

For them.

The right to destroy me.

Yes.

Undoubtedly, it exists.

Who else, if not them, has the right to destroy me, hate me, and crush me?

It continues to grow larger.

If left alone, it will grow bigger and bigger until it becomes an unbearable size for anyone to handle.

It will make my loved ones fight against me.

If its purpose is to bring me pain and suffering, then it will do so.

"It seems I must be terrifying."

I speak towards the resentful gaze directed at me.

"Since you don't have the confidence to control me directly, or attack me directly, or to kill me, you must resort to this despicable method of making me kill my own people with my own hands."

There was no response, but I felt the writhing of the massive resentment.

"How many of you are there? Tens of thousands? Hundreds of thousands? Or even millions?"

"If the result of your anger and desire for revenge is merely this, is it not…"

"Inadequate hatred?"

"Inadequate anger?"

"Inadequate desire for revenge?"

"Is it not too, petty?"

I provoke them.

"You weak beings."

"Because you were weak in life."

"Even in death, you are weak."

Their grudge may be rooted in injustice, but at the core, it's because they were weak and died as a result of that weakness.

If they had been strong, they wouldn't have died.

If they had been as strong as the hero, Ellen Artorius.

If they had possessed power themselves.

There would have been no need to flee or be killed.

I speak towards the grudge-filled beings, the group of weak spirits.

Since they don't have the courage to attack me, this method of causing me pain is ultimately the way of the weak, and is this group not still weak?

The resentful spirits did not answer.

However, their rough squirming and threatening rippling told me everything.

The spirits were furious.

There's no confidence in winning.

But.

I cannot leave the growing resentful spirits as they are.

I cannot allow such resentment to inhabit others.

I don't want to fight with the ones I love.

I can't let them control others any longer.

"Let's test whose hatred is stronger."

"Whose mind is stronger."

If they hate me.

If those spirits hate me, then I must bear it.

I cannot let others bear the burden that I should carry.

I don't think I can endure it, but if it's something I must bear.

Whether it's just or not, if the hatred, anger, and desire for revenge are directed at me.

"Come and inhabit me."

Not in others, but I must let their resentment and hatred inhabit me.

At my provocation, the resentful spirits watch me.

"Why."

I throw my final provocation at them.

"Are you afraid?"

I no longer needed any more words.

Despair-filled bodies of the group began to vibrate.

Rumble!

"Damn the Demon King."

"Yes."

"We shall."

"Curse."

"You."

"With your own hands, destroy everything you love."

The massive darkness, like a cloud, begins to condense.

The spirits changed their minds.

Instead of making me kill my loved ones, that they possesed, with my own hands, they intended to possess me and force me to destroy my loved ones with my own hands.

I spread my arms wide.

"Come, you weak beings."

To those who had no choice but to be sacrificed, to those pitiful beings.

I offer the opportunity to destroy me.

CHAPTER 503

It's not that I took them lightly.

There was no way I could take them lightly.

I didn't think it was possible for me to endure the vengeful spirits' erosion, which even Olivia couldn't withstand.

I knew this was a reckless attempt.

However, I had no other choice.

I had to somehow deal with the army of vengeful spirits that would become an uncontrollable problem if they continued to grow.

Since they had dominated Olivia, they could dominate anyone.

Port Mokna would be reduced to ashes, and Liana, who was just as despised as me, would die as well.

Thus, I decided to imprison the army of vengeful spirits within myself.

Not anyone else, but I had to endure it.

Their hatred was directed at me, so I had to bear it.

No other alternatives came to mind.

As the wave of vengeful spirits began to erode me, I felt a strange sensation.

The feeling of my soul being attacked.

Had Olivia felt this way too?

If consciousness were like the moon floating in the night sky.

And if the self were the world reflected under the moonlight of that consciousness.

It was a bizarre feeling as if the moon named consciousness suddenly became distant and faint like the starlight in the night sky.

With just the starlight, the world could not be illuminated.

And so, as the distant moonlight failed to illuminate the world.

I felt a distant sensation that the self, shrouded in darkness, was fading away.

Since they had entered my soul and mind, I could feel their anger and hatred not with my skin, but with my soul.

I couldn't identify who these massive vengeful spirits were.

However, the harsh and desperate images that passed by contaminated my mind.

A mental retching, or vomiting sensation.

Such a chilling feeling dominated my soul, dragging me towards the abyss.

If I sink, it's over.

I brought them in not to be dominated, but to be imprisoned.

I cannot fall.

In the midst of the distant and dark sensation where consciousness recedes and the self is engulfed in darkness.

I think.

The sacrificed ones can hate and resent me.

They are only victims of everything unrelated to what I have experienced and derived from me.

They can resent me.

Hate me.

Be angry.

And have the right to destroy me.

However.

I have no intention of giving myself to them.

I plan to endure.

To imprison their hatred, anger, and desire for revenge within me, preventing them from drawing in any more vengeful spirits.

I said they had the right to destroy me, but I never accepted that they could.

I feel sorry for their sacrifices, pity, and guilt.

Unfortunately.

I cannot die.

In Rezaira, I became a Master Class.

However.

What I learned in Rezaira.

From Luna and Ronan, and Lena and Arta.

It wasn't how to wield a sword, but how to wield my heart.

The power to control the heart.

Becoming a Master Class was, strictly speaking, a result derived from reaching the pinnacle.

The world of the mind, soul, and heart.

I have mastered the art of controlling them.

My consciousness has become distant like a star.

My self is shrouded in darkness.

But.

Stars don't die easily.

Although the far-off starlight is faint, one cannot say it isn't light.

Even if it's a weak light on the verge of extinguishing, if it's the light of my consciousness.

It will be immortal.

Even if the starlight can't illuminate my self, it is not gone, but merely trapped in the darkness.

I have little knowledge of the mysterious power used by Luna Artorious.

I cannot wield the strength she displayed as an incarnation in this world.

But the mind.

And the soul.

That is the realm of the heart,

And in my heart, I alone am the deity.

Under the name of self-suggestion, I have always ruled as the god of my will and heart.

Spirits surged into my mind like a torrent, trying to shatter and collapse my consciousness. My awareness and self were fading away.

However, that starlight.

The power Luna wielded.

She magnified the existing moon and drew forth a mystical moonlit sword.

It's not the same method.

Instead, with the sensation of reaching out to the distant starlight,

The sensation of pulling it towards me,

I pulled my drifting consciousness back.

Not like moonlight, but shining like the sun.

I resist the dark souls trying to swallow my self, who are dragging me into the night of consciousness.

I will endure.

I will bear it.

I imprison the spirits trying to consume me within myself.

“Did you think…”

I let them live within me.

“…it would be easy to consume me?”

I will return to the world of reason and substance.

Eventually, when I pulled my senses back from the depths of my consciousness into reality,

“…?”

I found myself lying in bed, in my room at Lazak's royal castle, embraced by Olivia, not at Port Mokna.

“Rein… Reinhardt?”

Olivia's eyes widened as she saw me open my eyes.

“Why am I here……?”

“You… you're awake! You're finally awake! You're awake!”

Tears welled up in Olivia's eyes, and she hugged me even tighter than before.

I was certain that I had been on the outskirts of Port Mokna just a moment ago.

Why am I here?

What I thought was a long time felt like an instant when I left Rizaira.

What I thought was an instant seemed to have taken quite some time.

“Sob… Rheinhardt… I… I was scared. I thought you wouldn't wake up. I was afraid you wouldn't… Waaah!”

Olivia sobbed and embraced me.

Had several days passed?

What had happened?

I had no idea. I weakly embraced Olivia, who was crying and holding me tightly.

I had no strength in my body.

Was my energy drained?

“Sister… are you alright…?”

At my question, Olivia twisted her lips as tears fell.

“Now… now is the time for you to worry about me?!”

Perhaps upset by my words even in this situation, Olivia wept even harder.

“Wait… just a moment…”

“Huh? Do you need something?”

I tried to separate from Olivia and get out of bed.

No, I tried to.

However,

“Ugh…”

I couldn't even maintain my balance due to the excruciating headache that felt like my head would split open.

“Reinhardt! Are you okay?”

“Yeah… Yes…”

I managed to maintain my sense of self.

I was sure I could.

“You're not okay. Look at yourself…”

Olivia, weeping, supported me and led me to the mirror.

“…”

Looking at the mirror, I saw that my hair had turned completely white.

Although I succeeded in imprisoning countless spirits within me,

It had undoubtedly affected my mind and body.

After the battle between Olivia Lanze, who had been dominated by massive spirits at Port Mokna, and the Demon King.

The Demon King, having absorbed all the massive resentful spirits into his body, had been unconscious for a week.

Olivia Lanze, who had regained her sense of self, needed rest as well, but she stayed by the Demon King's side, tending to him while he was unconscious.

Upon hearing that the Demon King had regained consciousness, everyone from the Council of Elders to the royal family sought him out.

The Demon King, his hair now turned white, looked incredibly frail.

It wasn't just a lack of energy.

Living with a collection of wills trying to kill him trapped within his soul was not something a normal being could withstand.

Even if one wasn't a normal being, one couldn't easily handle it.

It was as if he was dying in real-time but holding on through sheer willpower.

To prepare for any possible situation, Olivia Lanze, the Holy Order's leader, continued to watch over the Demon King even after he regained consciousness.

The Demon King was clearly conscious. However, everyone could see that his condition was worsening.

"Ugh… Uuugh!"

"Reinhardt… Are you okay?"

Olivia, biting her lip, watched as Reinhardt collapsed in the castle corridor, retching.

"I'm fine… I'm okay…"

Reinhardt, who kept repeating he was fine, looked anything but.

His white hair had returned to normal thanks to the Dreadfiend Ring, but the Demon King was tormented by fever, headaches, and retching.

Just as the mind could affect the body, it seemed as though the soul could affect the body too.

Olivia supported Reinhardt as he staggered to his feet after finishing retching.

The resentful spirits trapped within Reinhardt's mind were not removed by holy power. Thus, they couldn't influence the outside world, but they were directly affecting Reinhardt.

Olivia could heal the decayed and rotten limbs from the battle.

The Demon King's waning strength could be healed by Olivia's holy power.

But she couldn't help with the internal issues.

She couldn't purify or heal the resentful spirits embedded within the Demon King's soul.

The Demon King struggled with not only national affairs but also daily life. Therefore, he took up residence in Lazak Castle, receiving care from the Holy Order's leader.

The fact that the Demon King was growing weaker was kept a closely guarded secret.

Charlotte, the regent, had already been handling all of Edina's national affairs, so there were no issues in Edina.

However, the atmosphere among the Edina high-ranking officials, who knew the Demon King was growing weaker, was overwhelmingly gloomy.

Operations at Port Mokna were, of course, suspended. They were in the process of a large-scale withdrawal since it was unclear whether the threats in the vicinity had been completely eliminated.

The responsibility for this entire situation primarily lay with the commander, Liana de Grantz.

"…"

Reinhardt, who looked too weak even to sit in a chair, sat in his bedroom, leaning on Olivia, and quietly stared down at someone.

Liana de Grantz.

The commander of Port Mokna knelt before the Demon King with her head bowed.

Proud and never having bowed before the Demon King, even though he was her lord in name only, Liana de Grantz now knelt before him, her head lowered.

"It's all… my fault."

Reinhardt silently stared down at Liana.

The massacre orchestrated by Liana had been the beginning of this calamity.

Olivia Lanze had paid the first price.

And so, to save Olivia Lanze, the Demon King made the choice to imprison those enormous vengeful spirits within his own soul.

Although the Demon King's soul was his own for the moment, it was gradually dying.

Liana could not even take responsibility for everything that had started because of what she had done.

Others had to pay the price for the sin she committed.

Because she couldn't bear it.

Because it was painful.

"If you tell me to die, I'll die."

Liana could only say that to her friend, who paid the price in her stead.

Olivia silently watched the scene unfold.

Reinhardt looked down at Liana, who was ready to accept death in payment if need be.

"You couldn't have known this would happen."

"…"

"Of course, you knew it was a sin, but you must not have known that this would be the outcome. Definitely not."

Reinhardt's cracked voice, completely different from his usual tone, filled both Olivia and Liana with an awful feeling just by listening to it.

"If unforeseen, unintended events happen due to your actions, and others have to pay the price, and so you have to die…"

Reinhardt spoke with difficulty.

"Then, shouldn't I die too…?"

"…"

Strictly speaking, what Reinhardt and Liana had done were qualitatively different.

But if they only considered the results, unintended events occurred, and others had to pay the price for them – that was the same.

Reinhardt's wish ultimately brought about unintended consequences, causing the Gate incident.

Liana's actions, which were meant to protect Edina and Reinhardt, resulted in Reinhardt's impending death.

In the end, they were the same; if Liana had to face a punishment akin to the death penalty for this, then Reinhardt, the Demon King, should receive the same punishment.

Reinhardt silently watched the tears rolling down Liana's cheeks, dripping off her chin and falling to the floor.

There was nothing she could do about the problems caused by her actions.

Reinhardt knew that feeling of helplessness better than anyone else.

"We've talked about this long ago, haven't we…?"

"…"

"Let's live and do something."

At Reinhardt's words, Liana's shoulders began to tremble.

His voice cracked, and he was tormented by fever, looking as though he could die at any moment – that was the Demon King's current state.

Reinhardt was bearing the unbearable.

Everyone knew that.

Reinhardt himself was not unaware of it either.

In the end, it was possible that a punishment was needed for the significant problems that arose for the Demon King because of something he did not command.

However, nothing could be gained through death.

Under the pretense of a hundred-fold retribution, Liana de Grantz was far too important in Edina to be killed.

Liana de Grantz was not punished.

The weakened Reinhardt was being cared for by Olivia, but naturally, others came to visit as well.

"What you've done is insane."

Lucinil, the Lord of Wednesday, said as much to Reinhardt.

"There was no other way."

The spirits were too large to be eradicated by divine power and were growing in real-time. However, there was no other solution but to imprison them within the soul's prison and endure it.

"I wouldn't call this a solution. Did you even think it was possible in the first place?"

Lucinil vented her anger in front of the Demon King.

"I must… make it possible."

The Demon King, with his drained and weary expression, said so.

"It's not that you made it possible. You're just enduring it."

"…"

"Have you forgotten about Charlotte's case?"

At Lucinil's words, Reinhardt fell silent.

Charlotte's soul eventually became one with the Demon King.

The Demon King's consciousness had disappeared, so their personalities weren't mixed, but the number of consciousnesses now residing in Reinhardt's mind was overwhelming.

"In the long run, your soul will become one with the souls inside you, blending together."

Reinhardt showed no reaction to these words, but Olivia, who had been standing beside him, turned pale.

"Then… what will happen?"

"I don't know the details since I've never conducted an experiment of this magnitude. However, the sense of self will disappear, and one will become a completely different entity."

Although he is maintaining his consciousness now, as he gradually assimilates with them, Reinhardt's existence will vanish like a handful of sand scattered in the desert.

He won't die, but will become a completely different being.

Upon hearing this, Olivia's complexion went from pale to ashen.

Lucinil was the magician who had dealt with souls the most in the world.

Therefore, she was a being who had conducted numerous experiments related to this.

If Lucinil said so, it would be so.

Reinhardt, listening to Lucinil's warning, appeared exhausted but said nothing.

CHAPTER 504

Charlotte, Harriet, and the Council of Elders, including Eleris, realized that Reinhardt's condition was far from normal.

And as time passed, Reinhardt's condition gradually worsened.

Vomiting, fever, chills.

Physical symptoms were consuming his mind and body along with the Demon King's spirit.

That was not all.

"Ugh!"

Plagued by nightmares, the Demon King would wake up as soon as he fell asleep.

Unable to properly sleep, the succubus queen Airi began to stay in the castle at the request of Olivia, who was in charge of Reinhardt's care.

"Valier…"

"…"

Airi could not find words to say as she looked at the Demon King's bloodshot eyes.

A demon who controls dreams.

Airi tried her best to comfort the Demon King's dreams so he could get proper rest.

However, even with Airi's power, she couldn't fully restore the Demon King's sleep from the torment of the vengeful spirits consuming his mind and body.

Everyone knew.

The Demon King was dying.

Is consciousness like a rubber band?

I felt as if the moment the tense string of consciousness snapped, it would be my end.

What I thought was a temporary task turned out to be a permanent one.

Achieving the impossible by not being consumed was already a feat.

But as long as I am like this, the eternal battle against the souls does not change.

Is it even possible?

I could already feel myself being gradually dominated by the physical symptoms.

Crash!

"Reinhardt…"

"It's alright. My hand just trembled."

I stared down at the cup that had slipped from my grasp and shattered on the floor.

What fight?

Even daily life was impossible.

Humanity's hatred and resentment toward me have been transformed into spiritual pain, affecting my body.

As soon as I loosened the grip on my consciousness, the words of hatred invaded my mind.

Sleeping scares me. Airi may be protecting my dreams, but how long can she keep doing so?

After some moment of falling asleep, will I ever regain consciousness?

And what will the vengeful spirits do with my body once they take control?

Will they force me to destroy the things I love with my own hands?

"…"

I cannot allow such a situation.

I do not want to break like this, nor can I.

But how?

I could resolve, but no solutions came to mind.

A royal meeting was convened, excluding the Demon King.

Liana de Grantz, Airi, Olivia Lanze, Harriet de Saint Owan, and Charlotte de Gardias attended.

And all of the Council of Elders.

Sarkegaar, Eleris, Lucinil, Luvien, Gallarush, and Antirianus.

All the most important authorities in Edina, except the Demon King, were gathered.

Knowing that the situation was extremely serious, everyone's expressions were understandably somber.

The Demon King was holding countless vengeful spirits within his soul.

Though he was enduring with superhuman willpower, if things continued as they were, the Demon King would become a completely different entity.

If the spirits of those who hated and despised the Demon King took control of his body and merged with his mind, what would happen?

No one knew. But it was clear that it would bring about a horrifying outcome, and everyone wanted to avoid that situation.

"We need a plan."

Charlotte spoke with a stern expression.

Although Charlotte was not as powerful as Reinhardt, she had a similar experience.

As a result of merging with a part of the Demon King's soul, permanent changes had occurred in her body. It was difficult to expect Reinhardt's mind and body to be safe in a fusion of such a scale, when even one-to-one fusions led to such consequences.

"First and foremost, we must separate the vengeful spirits clinging to His Majesty's soul."

Everyone regarded Reinhardt as important, but the one who could least hide their anxiety and worry at the possibility of Reinhardt's mind being obliterated was Sarkegaar.

"Assuming that's possible, how should we deal with the events that will unfold afterward?"

That was Luvien's question.

"From what I've heard, when those spirits were separated, they either controlled the minds of holy knights and priests or caused those who couldn't withstand the control to explode. Is that correct?"

Receiving Luvien's words, Gallarush looked at Olivia, who had witnessed the previous scene.

"Yes, that's what happened."

Either being controlled, or unable to withstand the control and having their bodies destroyed.

Although Olivia had been able to resist to some extent, it was only a small part. Eventually, when the spirits infiltrated her mind, she couldn't hold on and succumbed.

"If even priests and holy knights, who have mastered divine power, can be controlled, it's uncertain whether ordinary beings, let alone ourselves, will be safe when such things start to run rampant in Edina."

Gallarush's skepticism was reasonable.

To save Reinhardt's soul, the spirits that had already entered his mind must be extracted.

But the problem lay in what would happen next.

"So, are you suggesting we leave His Majesty in this state?"

Sarkegaar gritted his teeth and glared at Gallarush.

"You need to calm down. I just wanted to point out that acting recklessly without proper preparation could lead to even bigger problems."

"…"

Sarkegaar's anxiety was something everyone felt.

But Gallarush's opinion was correct.

Acting recklessly to save the Demon King could lead to the very thing he least desired. In fact, the Demon King himself had absorbed those spirits into his body as a form of self-sacrifice to prevent them from causing further harm.

"Is it impossible to separate the souls from Reinhardt's mind and then either extinguish them with divine power or ascend them?"

Harriet looked back and forth between Lucinil and Olivia.

Harriet knew that Lucinil had mastered magic dealing with souls, as did all the Council's Vampire Lords.

"Since they haven't completely merged yet… it's not theoretically impossible, but the scale is too large. We could try, but… the real problem is what happens after the separation."

Lucinil found it difficult to give a definitive answer.

"I wish I could say it with confidence, but I don't believe I can extinguish them. I was even controlled myself because I couldn't handle them."

Like Lucinil, Olivia judged it to be seemingly impossible.

"What on earth… What must His Majesty be enduring…?"

Eleris murmured blankly with a despairing expression.

Charlotte quietly observed the faces of the people sitting in the Council meeting.

The Vampire Lords of the Council were some of the most powerful magicians in the world and had accumulated knowledge over a very long time, making their knowledge incomparable to ordinary beings.

Olivia Lanze had access to an unparalleled level of divine power, impossible to compare with anyone else at the present time.

If they cannot find the answer here, then there is no answer.

The possibility of extracting the soul is slim.

It is too massive to be annihilated by any method.

There is no solution with magic or divine power.

Charlotte then thought of another approach.

One of the ancient magics, incantations.

If it's a Dettomorian, there might be a way.

However, incantations are powers that are difficult to predict in intent and outcome.

Not only is it uncertain whether the power of the Dettomorian can help the Demon King, but there is no guarantee that he will help the Demon King.

Nearly everyone has lost their homeland, and the Dettomorians are no exception.

Their desire to harm may be greater than their desire to help the Demon King.

The likelihood of putting Reinhardt in more danger in order to save him is even higher.

Therefore, Charlotte could not discuss incantations.

"Does it mean that we can only hope for Reinhardt's mind to remain intact?"

At Charlotte's words, everyone wore a grim expression.

Especially Liana, who could be seen as the cause of this situation, had the most disheartened look on her face.

Unable to even shed tears, she clenched her teeth and glared at the table.

Lucinil opened her mouth.

"Reinhardt is already doing the impossible. Originally… as we heard last time, it's natural for the body to collapse when such a scale of souls mixes together."

The priests and holy knights who ended up being dominated already possess tremendous mental strength.

Olivia, who could resist it, has even more powerful mental strength, and Reinhardt, who is suppressing it within his soul, is doing something even more impossible than Olivia.

Reinhardt has already achieved too many impossible things.

"To believe that Reinhardt can do something even more impossible here is too complacent."

At Lucinil's words, Charlotte quietly nodded.

Leaving Reinhardt to handle the next impossible task because he accomplished the previous one would be overly negligent.

Therefore, something must be done.

"What if we release the vengeful spirits that inhabit Reinhardt's soul somewhere far away on the continent, not in Edina?"

It was Airi, who had been silent all along.

Conduct a risky ritual in a remote area of the continent, then flee before the vengeful spirits infiltrate someone else.

In other words, leave the dangerous bomb in the world and return to Edina.

"Those vengeful spirits might roam the continent, absorbing other spirits and growing larger, eventually attacking Edina."

Everyone agreed with Eleris's words that releasing vengeful spirits on the continent would only be a temporary solution that would postpone the current threat to a more absolute one later on.

It might be a short-term solution, but in the long run, the even larger army of vengeful spirits will overwhelm Edina and the Demon King.

If that happens, there will be no next time.

Edina will be destroyed, and the Demon King will not survive.

No one has any countermeasures. Charlotte stared blankly at the table.

She had always been helped.

Reinhardt had always saved her.

She even failed to trust Reinhardt, committed what was tantamount to betrayal, and had even cursed him to suffer the worst pain in the world and die.

Yet Reinhardt saved her once again.

But now, when Reinhardt is in danger, she cannot be of any help.

In the end, they could only rely on him for help, but when Reinhardt truly needed assistance, no one could provide it.

Charlotte and the others each felt a similar sense of despair, albeit in their own unique ways.

Souls.

So many souls, on an unimaginably vast scale.

How could they possibly purify or remove them with magic or divine power?

In that moment of utter hopelessness, an old vampire named Antirianus cautiously put forth a suggestion.

"Have you considered soul transference?"

"Soul transference?" Regent Charlotte inquired, and the lord of Saturday, Antirianus, smiled faintly.

"Isn't the crux of the issue that if we leave the souls as they are, they will invade the world and the Demon King, or that they will merge with the souls of the Archdemon? Therefore, if we can find an entity that can bear the burden of these souls, we can resolve the problem."

The atmosphere in the council chamber froze at Antirianus's brutally simple and violent conclusion.

To save Reinhardt, someone else would have to take on the heavy burden.

"Wouldn't it be better for someone to become a sacrificial lamb than for us to lose our leader here?"

His words made sense, but they were sinister and chilling.

To find a sacrificial lamb to bear Reinhardt's burden.

"I… I'll do it," Liana spoke up, raising her head.

Since the problem stemmed from her, she seemed to feel it was only right that she bear the burden. She was tormented by guilt and self-reproach for being unable to help resolve the situation.

"Not just anyone can bear it. You might die on the spot," Olivia shook her head in response to Liana's words.

It was true that they could find a sacrificial lamb, but how many could actually bear that burden? They couldn't just choose anyone.

Many were willing, but there was doubt as to whether any of them could actually succeed.

"I should do it. At least I didn't die."

Reinhardt had managed to endure, and although Olivia had been controlled, she hadn't died. Thus, her offer to bear the souls was met with silence in the council chamber, and Liana lowered her head again.

Olivia had once again been saved by Reinhardt, and she was more than ready to die for him.

Seeing her willingness to take back the burden, Antirianus smiled.

"Regardless of whether one can bear the transference, the sacrificial lamb cannot remain in Edina."

“…That's true."

Once the souls were absorbed, one's self would be distorted, and their soul would merge with the others. They could no longer be the same person as before.

"Even so, if I'm the only one who can bear it without dying, I must do it."

Determined to save Reinhardt even at the cost of her own life, Olivia was prepared to accept the consequences.

Although she would never see Reinhardt again, even if she was left to wander the world with that heavy burden, she was ready.

"However, you hold a very important position in Edina. The great one would neither allow it nor permit it, and even if he did, your absence would leave a significant void."

Antirianus shook his head as if to say such an idea was extremely problematic.

"Even if the Thunder King can manage this, who will then take the lead in our vanguard?" Antirianus asked calmly.

"The same goes for everyone else in this room. Each and every one of you is an

irreplaceable and vital presence in Edina. There's no particular need to risk such a devastating loss of personnel."

The Four Heavenly Kings, including the Regent, and the Council of Elders – each one of them was essential to Edina.

So, regardless of whether they could handle it or not, even if they could, Antirianus believed they shouldn't.

Charlotte stared silently at Antirianus.

"Lord of Saturday, what are you trying to say? To resolve this situation, someone has to bear the burden of the vengeful spirits that Reinhardt is carrying. You say that no one in this room should do it. If it's impossible for those present, it will be impossible for anyone else in Edina. Are you suggesting that there is someone else who can bear it…?"

As she spoke, Charlotte's face turned pale.

She had realized why Antirianus brought it up in the first place.

Why he said that there was no need for anyone in this room to be sacrificed.

"Could it be… Could it be…"

Antirianus looked at Charlotte's pale face and smirked.

He laughed as if he could hardly contain his delight.

"The hero."

At his words, everyone in the conference room turned pale blue.

"Wouldn't Ellen Artorius willingly bear this burden?"

Everyone was appalled by Antirianus's malicious laughter.

CHAPTER 505

To save the Demon King, no one in Edina need to be sacrificed.

For that would entail a loss of Edina's power.

A being who possesses two sacred relics, exceptional beyond measure.

Ellen is fated to battle the Demon King eventually. Therefore, she cannot be with him, regardless of what the future holds.

It merely solidifies their destined enmity.

Whether Ellen is dominated by vengeful spirits or not, she is still destined to fight the Demon King.

Hence, nothing significant truly changes.

From this perspective, Antirianus's claim that no one in this room needed to be sacrificed was reasonable.

Not everyone here knows the full details about Ellen Artorius. However, they are all aware that she has reluctantly become humanity's hope as the Demon King's adversary.

Charlotte gazed down at the table with a stern expression.

Two years since the Gate incident.

Charlotte and Ellen shared the same guilt.

Both blamed themselves for not trusting Reinhardt when it mattered most, leading to the current situation.

They tormented themselves with endless self-reproach.

Charlotte could have been with Reinhardt, but Ellen could not and was fated not to.

Charlotte knew that there was no way for Ellen to escape the lengthy guilt and remorse.

But now, Reinhardt's very existence might vanish.

Ellen would be willing to give up her life to save Reinhardt.

By shouldering the hatred and hope of all the wandering souls, and by being corroded by them, she would try to save Reinhardt.

Even if, in the end, her very existence merged with the vengeful spirits and disappeared.

Charlotte knew that Ellen Artorius would do so if she could save Reinhardt.

She wouldn't hesitate to make that choice.

Later, even if the day came when she truly had to fight Reinhardt for their lives, if the only way to save him now was that choice, Ellen would have no other option.

Charlotte knew what decision Ellen would make, having experienced the same guilt and self-blame.

Harriet's face turned pale as she violently shook her head.

"Reinhardt would never, ever accept it."

Regardless of whether Ellen accepted it or not, Harriet believed Reinhardt would never allow such a situation.

And everyone agreed with Harriet's thoughts.

The vengeful spirits within Olivia hated him, and he thought he deserved their punishment, so he willingly accepted it into his body.

The present Reinhardt is slowly dying because of the hatred, anger, despair, and vengeance of too many vengeful spirits.

So even if Ellen tried to bear that burden for him, it was evident that he would never accept it.

"Of course, we must proceed with this matter in utmost secrecy. The great being must never know what we, the lesser beings, are planning."

"In his current weakened state, a simple hypnosis or sleep spell should keep him asleep for an extended period."

"By the time the great being awakens from his deep sleep, everything will be over."

"There is no reason why we can't deceive him twice."

With a sinister smile, Antirianus glanced at a spot in the meeting room.

"Thunder King, don't you agree?"

"…"

Faced with that malicious gaze implying she should understand his words, having already deceived the king once under the pretext of serving him, Liana clenched her fists and tightly closed her eyes.

"This wretched creature…"

Lucinil clenched her teeth as she glared at Antirianus. Frustrated by the malicious behavior, Lucinil burst out.

"Why on earth do you do this? Why… why do you do this?"

"Lord of Wednesday, is what I said incorrect? Or, do you have any other solution besides the one I have proposed?"

Finally, Lucinil exploded.

"I don't have one! I know I don't! You're right! Yes, you must be right! There's no other way… there must be no other way! But… why do you only think in such a way? Why do you only think in a direction that causes someone suffering?"

"Well…"

Antirianus laughed.

"Isn't it… entertaining?"

At the bizarrely cruel laughter, Charlotte shuddered.

Lucinil, fed up with the malice, stood up and muttered coldly.

"You're like a monster that feeds on tears."

Lucinil kicked the door of the conference room in disgust and left, casting one last glance at Antirianus.

"I really hate you."

"What a pity."

-Bang!

Not wanting to deal with it anymore, Lucinil left the conference room.

Antirianus was right.

It had to be the best choice.

To deceive Reinhardt once more.

In the name of doing it for Reinhardt.

Make an offer that only someone with the ability to handle it all can accept.

The words themselves were correct.

Antirianus, too, had found the option to save his lord as a loyal servant to Reinhardt.

Is it acceptable for the process to be like this, even if the conclusion is that of loyalty?

If his intentions were merely to seek pleasure.

Is that really loyalty?

"It seems there is no other way."

But. In the end, only such a conclusion is necessary for a true loyalist.

"I agree."

Sarkegaar, too, agreed with the conclusion.

After the Council of Elders meeting, Harriet walked absentmindedly down the hallway of Lazak Castle.

The thought of the terrible plan lingered in her mind.

Harriet absentmindedly walked to Reinhardt's bedroom door.

When she opened the door, there was Reinhardt, asleep.

Three people were by the bedside.

Olivia Lanze, holding Reinhardt's hand with a worried expression.

Airi, with her hand on Reinhardt's forehead.

And Liana, unable to look directly at Reinhardt, staring blankly out the window.

Olivia continued to restore the weakening body.

Airi somehow held onto the crumbling spirit.

The two were barely holding on to Reinhardt's dying body and soul.

"How is he…?"

Olivia shook her head with a depressed expression.

There was no sign of improvement, only deterioration.

"His conscious time is getting shorter."

“…Is that so?"

Airi had been adjusting to make Reinhardt dream peacefully when he lost

consciousness, so he wouldn't be exposed to the despair of the wandering souls.

It was possible because she was a demon who controlled dreams, one of the most powerful among them.

The fortunate thing was that Airi was adept at using this power for healing purposes, not for bewitchment.

Having soothed the dreams of many people for healing, she was able to somewhat handle Reinhardt's unconsciousness, which was no different from being in the midst of chaos.

Harriet stood quietly, looking down at Reinhardt, who looked much worse just by his complexion.

Harriet could not even begin to fathom how much pain Reinhardt must be enduring.

"Just how… dire is the situation?"

Harriet asked Olivia, who was the only one present who knew what Reinhardt was going through. Despite knowing that Airi was controlling the dream, Olivia spoke softly as she looked at Reinhardt asleep in agony.

"In my life, I've never experienced anything so horrifying."

Olivia looked up at Harriet.

"Even if I could handle it, even if I could take on Reinhardt's pain and continue to live… it was so terrifying that I'd be afraid to accept it."

At the mention of such terrible pain, Harriet's expression hardened. She knew how Olivia felt about Reinhardt.

Olivia had been saved by Reinhardt numerous times, and she had saved him as well.

Harriet knew that Olivia was someone who would die for Reinhardt without hesitation.

Olivia would do so if she could bear the burden herself.

However, that didn't mean there was no fear or terror involved.

The experience was so horrifying that even Olivia could not help but hesitate to some extent.

The countless spirits of hatred were attempting to dominate her soul, causing immense spiritual pain.

Not knowing what spiritual pain even was, Harriet felt even more fearful and pitied Reinhardt.

Enduring this alone was already an incredible feat, but hoping for Reinhardt to overcome more than this was nothing short of wishful thinking.

That's why the ruler of Saturday proposed a dreadful plan to pass this burden onto Ellen.

Olivia, holding Reinhardt's hand, lowered her gaze.

"Is it… possible for that person… to endure this…?"

Her tone was a mixture of crushing defeat and a sense of inferiority.

Many people would rather bear this burden themselves.

Airi, Harriet, Olivia, Liana, and even some of the Elders like Sarkegaar.

Many wanted to take on this burden themselves.

"Why can't I…?"

Olivia expressed her miserable feelings.

"It's not like that,"

Harriet shook her head.

"What do you mean?"

"It's just that it doesn't matter if you can't endure it."

“…What?"

The Lord of Saturday did not suggest this plan because Ellen could handle what Reinhardt was going through.

Putting aside Antirianus's dreadful proposal, there's no need to discuss what choice Ellen would make if she were to accept such an offer.

Ellen would undoubtedly accept it.

Ellen would be manipulated by her own sense of guilt towards Reinhardt.

Someone must make a sacrifice, and the majority of people there can't even make that sacrifice.

If these people are devoured by the vengeful spirits, the loss would be immense. After all, they're all needed in Edina.

The logic of sacrificing Ellen by Antirianus is simple.

It's not because Ellen Artorius is extraordinary that she can handle these vengeful spirits.

Ellen is destined to be an enemy of Edina and the Demon King.

So, what does it matter if she becomes an enemy through hatred and assimilation with the spirits? She's destined to be an enemy anyway, so she might as well take on the burden that Reinhardt carries and become a true enemy.

Ellen was expendable to Edina, and she was prepared to be sacrificed.

That was Antirianus's logic for suggesting the sacrifice.

"Even if she can't bear it, even if Ellen collapses and loses her sense of self, it doesn't matter because she's an enemy… that's what this is about…”

"…”

Putting aside whether it was possible or not, it was simply a matter of cost-benefit analysis.

Everyone in Edina was necessary to Edina.

It would be a loss for Edina if any of them were burdened with this task and banished.

So, if Ellen, who was fated to become an enemy and willing to bear any burden, took on this task, Edina would not suffer any loss.

It was just a cruel cost-benefit argument.

Ellen might be able to handle it, or she might be assimilated.

But as an extraordinary being, she wouldn't die like the others when her body gave out.

At least, she could become as strong as Olivia.

If she endured well, perhaps as strong as Reinhardt.

Or she might even surpass him, but from Edina's perspective, Ellen's fate didn't matter, and that's why the plan was proposed.

So, Olivia didn't need to feel inferior or defeated by Ellen.

The proposal wasn't made because Ellen could handle it.

Clearly, Ellen was a good person from Edina's standpoint, but not from Reinhardt's.

So, they had to deceive Reinhardt again.

With wide eyes, Olivia tightly grasped Reinhardt's hand.

Olivia didn't like Ellen.

Even more so than before, she didn't like her.

"…"

But was it acceptable?

Just because Ellen would accept the sacrifice, was it right to make such a proposal?

"Instead, let me…"

Liana, looking out the window, spoke.

"Shouldn't I be the one to do it?"

Ellen was an outsider in this matter, and the responsibility fell on Liana.

Instead of suddenly imposing the sacrifice on Ellen, wouldn't it be right for Liana to bear it herself?

Not being controlled by those vengeful spirits, but enduring until her body collapsed from mental exhaustion.

Shouldn't Liana at least attempt to bear it?

Liana's face, as she spoke with determination, was filled with deep guilt and self-blame.

It was unclear if Ellen could handle it.

Liana couldn't shake the thought that she should take on the burden and be banished from Edina instead.

Liana struggled with the situation where someone else constantly had to shoulder the burden stemming from her actions.

Liana was needed in Edina.

So Antirianus's logic was that she shouldn't be sacrificed, but Liana didn't necessarily have to follow that suggestion.

"Liana."

Airi softly called Liana.

"Come here, please."

“…Yes."

Airi beckoned Liana to her side as she placed her hand on Reinhardt's forehead.

"I'll show you the visions of despair and vengeful spirits that Reinhardt is experiencing for a moment."

The images of despair and vengeful spirits existing in the depths of Reinhardt's consciousness.

"I only saw it briefly, but I don't think I could bear it."

Airi looked at Liana, as if asking if she was ready, and promised to show her only a small portion of the painful visions.

“…Yes, show me."

If Liana could endure this, she might truly be the one to bear it.

If she couldn't even handle a part of it, Liana would only meet a miserable end.

Airi cautiously took Liana's hand.

"…!"

As a result of seeing just a fragment of that pain, Liana fell into a coma for two days.

Shhrrring

Ellen, with Lament returned to an ordinary sword and sheathed, stepped down from the heap of brutally slain monster corpses.

The soldiers saluted Ellen, who was wearing a silver plate armor.

"You've done well."

"Have all the nearby areas been cleared?"

Surveying the plain where the monsters' cries had subsided, Ellen mounted the horse that a squad member had brought.

"Yes, we just received word from Shanafel that securing the safety of the troops' march has just been completed."

"Then I'll head back. Please take care of leading the squad."

"Understood!"

Hee-hee-heeng!

As Ellen spurred her horse, the white steed began to gallop.

The hero, wearing magnificent silver plate armor with the Cloak of the Sun God draped over it and the Sword of The God of Moon at her waist, raced across the plain filled with the corpses of monsters.

At the edge of the plain, the bodies of monsters were continuously spread out.

After riding for a while, Ellen could see white smoke rising beyond the hills.

As Ellen crossed the last hill, a vast plain unfolded before her, where densely packed tents filled every corner of her view.

The strongest army of humankind.

And for that reason, the last army of humankind.

Ellen slowly guided her horse towards the massive encampment where cooking smoke rose from various places.

CHAPTER 506

Strictly speaking, Ellen had no official rank.

Although she occasionally commanded a special unit tasked with handling the Gate crisis and was under the jurisdiction of the Allied Forces' headquarters, Ellen was not a member of the imperial army.

While she held the honorary title of the princess's guardian knight, that title held little meaning now that the princess had vanished along with the Demon King.

Emperor Bertus de Gardias of the empire had not granted Ellen any rank or affiliation.

“The Hero has arrived!”

“The Hero has returned!”

Despite her lack of rank, every soldier who encountered Ellen saluted her from a distance.

This applied to everyone, regardless of their position in the hierarchy.

Every single soldier, squad leaders, company commanders, and even those who held the rank equivalent to a general saluted Ellen with respect and admiration.

The fact that Ellen had no rank was inconsequential, as it would only have caused her inconvenience.

If she were given a mediocre rank, superiors would appear above her.

If a rank equivalent to a military authority was given, Ellen, a powerful combatant, would be called to attend various meetings.

While an honorary rank could have been granted, Bertus chose not to.

Without any affiliation or rank, Ellen had access to all military resources, could

requisition supplies, and even conscript soldiers.

At that time, she had just returned from clearing out monsters near the marching routes and the areas surrounding the stationed troops.

Originally, Ellen did not wear the Holy Swords Lament and Holy Cloak Lapelt at all times.

However, since she began living in the military base where people could see her anywhere and anytime, Ellen started wearing Lament's scabbard on her waist.

Partially, this was to prevent soldiers from becoming overly excited upon seeing Ellen in person and rudely requesting to see the Lament and Lapelt.

But more precisely, she did it so that people could see her everywhere.

Just a glimpse of Ellen from a distance would significantly raise morale.

Understanding the implicit desire of the military commanders for Ellen to always wear and display the Holy Relics, even in non-combat situations, she wore them.

Those who reached the Master Class often preferred being lightly armed or unarmed, wearing only simple armor or carrying a weapon. With Aura Armor that was stronger than steel for defense, there was no need to wear restrictive plate armor.

Wearing the elaborate plate armor was in the same vein as proudly displaying the Holy Relics.

Of course, that did not mean the plate armor was entirely useless.

Although it wasn't frequently used, this was a ceremonial armor designed for Ellen to wear during official occasions by Adelia and her researchers.

An armor created solely for the Hero.

However, being ceremonial did not mean it lacked practicality.

The armor itself possessed tremendous magic resistance and numerous enchantments, including lightening its weight. It was a national treasure-grade

artifact.

Nevertheless, it was still meant for show.

Ellen did not enjoy the attention she received.

The more people projected their hopes onto her, the more she understood the ultimate goal they desired.

The death of the Demon King.

Each time she sensed their hopes, Ellen felt as though someone was tightening a noose around her neck.

Everywhere she went, there were only soldiers and an army bearing the heavy responsibility of humanity's salvation. Among all these soldiers, Ellen carried the heaviest burden. Perhaps even more so than Saviolin Turner.

And so, Ellen was suffering from even more intense gazes and pressure than usual.

Fools, regardless of age, were ever-present.

It wasn't just the soldiers who loitered around her personal tent, wanting to catch a glimpse of Ellen's face whenever she rested.

Not only were there imperial soldiers, but elite troops and commanders from other regions and countries, including the vassal states, were all gathered as well.

In the early days of the campaign, there were even more commanders and knights who would come to greet her, boasting of who they were and from where, than there were tactless soldiers.

Ellen couldn't turn them away, so hearing of this situation, Saviolin Turner moved Ellen's quarters and issued strict orders not to let any outsiders in.

From then on, Ellen was not disturbed during her rest in the tent, unless it was for important matters.

In such a garrison, where Ellen's quarters were located.

Ellen handed the reins of her horse to a soldier, received a salute from the soldiers guarding the area to prevent outsiders from entering, and went inside.

A fairly unique and special area within the garrison's quarters.

Ellen thought this garrison area was better than others.

"Ah, Ellen. You're back?"

"Yeah. Adelia."

"You've worked hard, Ellen."

"Thanks, Louis."

Ellen nodded her head in response to the greetings of Adelia and Louis Ancton, who were carrying a pile of magical items.

This was the residence of the troops borrowed from the temple.

And further in, there was a garrison area for the troops of royal class origin.

Here, nobody called Ellen a hero.

That's why, sometimes, Ellen felt as if she had returned to a moment in the past that she could never go back to.

Not all the temple students were conscripted into the army, as not all of them had majors related to combat.

However, nearly all the students of the temple's royal class were conscripted, and except for the few who disappeared with Reinhardt during the gate incident, all of the royal class second-year students at the time were conscripted.

All of them had their own duties and roles, even if they weren't as prominent as Ellen.

"Cayer! I told you to charge the Arc Crystal!"

"I'm doing it! Can't I eat first?!"

"How many times do I have to tell you to prepare it in advance, since we don't know when we'll need it?!"

"Ugh, this tiny thing is always making a fuss."

"What? Tiny? Did you just talk back to your senior?"

"You don't even attend temple classes anymore, so what senior? Can't I call you my older sister?"

"Why would you call me your older sister, you brat!"

Ellen watched from a distance as Redina and Cayer, who had grown quite a bit in two years but were still like children, bickered with each other.

Redina, who possessed the talent of No Casting.

And Cayer, with the massive magical power talent.

These two had inevitably become battle partners for quite some time.

On one hand, Redina could cast magic without casting, but had a tiny amount of magical power, while on the other hand, Cayer had an enormous amount of magical power but couldn't cast magic.

So, ever since Adelia created a giant version of the Power Cartridge called the Arc Crystal, Cayer charged it whenever he had time, and Redina drew out the charged magical power to use magic. They had been maintaining this method for a long time.

The Arc Crystal was designed to extract mana from Cayer, who was inept at handling magical powers.

It was an artifact that only Cayer could use, and the inherent magical power within it was designed to be easily used by Redina. Adelia had originally created the massive artifact for that purpose.

Although it was too large to be carried around by hand, there was nothing better for defending the base against large-scale monster attacks.

Only those who had witnessed it firsthand could truly appreciate the spectacle of thousands of fireballs raining down from the sky and sweeping away waves of monsters.

No matter how much magical power the Arc Crystal held, Redina could deplete it in a short amount of time.

As a result, the Arc Crystal was always in a state of insufficient power.

In terms of compatibility of abilities, there were none better than the two of them, but their relationship grew worse the more they spent time together.

"Oh? Ellen's here?"

"Yes, senior."

Upon seeing Ellen watching from a distance, Redina hurried over and pointed at Cayer.

"Could you say something to that guy? I've told him countless times to charge up in advance, but he never seems to do it properly!"

"Hey, come on!"

Cayer glanced at Ellen in the distance, then angrily shouted back at Redina.

"I'm human too, you know! Stop treating me like some sort of magic battery charger!"

"Well, if you're not a magic charger, what are you? What else do you do besides embracing the Arc Crystal for a few hours? Is it so hard to contribute to battles like Ellen, or research, or anything else?"

Redina wasn't just teasing or scolding for fun.

She was genuinely angry.

"Do you know how many people died last time our defenses were breached? Is that so hard? What on earth are you doing? If you had charged up just a bit more, none of this would have happened!"

Cayer wasn't simply defending himself half-heartedly.

He was genuinely angry as well.

"I almost died several times during the last battle because of mana depletion. Are you even aware of that? You think I'm lazy? That I have nothing to do? Do you think you'd be able to do anything without me?"

This was a war against monsters.

People were actually dying, and Redina had to witness the deaths of people who couldn't be saved due to the insufficient power of the Arc Crystal.

Cayer, a prodigy of immense magical power, was not an endless source of power either. He had to wait for his depleted mana to recover before he could recharge the Arc Crystal.

Both were doing their best.

However, they couldn't help but be upset by the incidents that occurred due to their circumstances.

Their relationship was deteriorating.

And it was getting worse.

Finally, as harsh words began to fly, Ellen cautiously placed her hand on Redina's shoulder.

"Stop it, both of you."

"…"

"Cayer, let's go eat. Take a break for now."

"…Tsk."

With Ellen's intervention, the two stopped arguing.

Redina clenched her teeth and stared at the dirt floor of the garrison.

If only they could do a little more.

A little bit more.

They could have saved those who didn't have to die.

Because of such thoughts, Redina lashed out at Cayer, who could be considered her most crucial supporter.

Even though she knew it was foolish.

Redina eventually covered her face with both hands and let out a stifled sob.

"I'm such… an idiot…”

They both knew they were doing their best.

Yet they hurt each other with words they didn't need to say, due to regret

In the wake of someone's death, they exchange unnecessary words, wounded by regret and self-blame.

“…Redina?"

From afar, someone wearing the emblem of a Holy Knight approaches Ellen and Redina.

"Adriana…”

Having left the temple, Adriana had returned to the Order of Tu’an after the Gate incident and was now carrying out her duties as a Holy Knight.

Despite facing several issues, including allegations of collusion with the Demon King, Adriana had received a pardon, albeit reluctantly.

The truth behind all that had happened remained unknown, and it was both frustrating and saddening. Like everyone else, Adriana had sought a role she alone could fulfill and joined the war effort.

"What's wrong? Did you argue with Cayer again?"

"…"

Embracing Redina, who was suppressing her tears, Adriana looks at Ellen.

"Rest, Ellen. You must be the most exhausted."

“…Yes, senior."

Ellen watches silently as Adriana takes Redina to a tent.

Ellen knows that there is an indelible shadow on Adriana's face.

A person Adriana cherished, Irene's hound.

Ellen played a direct role in Loyar's death, and Adriana had been there.

Though she thought she deserved the blame, Adriana never held a grudge against Ellen.

War.

The war against monsters was breaking people.

This was no exception for the students of the Royal Class.

And Ellen herself was no exception.

Every Royal Class graduate had a role, even those who majored in non-combat studies. For example, Adelia, who had a non-combat major, designed the crucial power cartridges for this war using her unique talent. She continually produced improved versions of her invention.

In Kono Lint's case, though lacking combat skills, he teleported critically injured soldiers to the rear or moved troops onto the battlefield using spatial teleportation.

Even Ranian Sesor, with her musical talent, was tirelessly engaged in morale-boosting activities, such as conducting military band performances and providing comfort within the garrison.

Everyone had a role in the Gate incident, and each performed their duties in this final campaign.

Ellen had her meal at the public dining tent in the Royal Class garrison.

Though she could have eaten in her private tent, Ellen did not desire any special treatment.

As Ellen sat quietly eating, someone sat across from her.

"You're back, I see. Ellen."

"Ah… Yes."

It was Ludwig.

Thanks to Moonshine's effect, all of the Royal Class close combat students now knew how to do Magic Body Strengthening.

However, only Ellen had reached the Master Class.

Ludwig was also one of the four who had awakened their Magic Body Strengthening abilities on their own during their first year.

Ellen, Reinhardt, Cliffman, and Ludwig.

Each had their roles and, although Ellen's level was so high she usually undertook solo missions, Royal Class students typically formed teams based on the required personnel for their assignments.

Being from the temple and possessing exceptional skills, the Royal Class students usually worked together, creating a bond among them.

Though there were cases like Redina and Cayer, the students generally had a positive effect on one another when working together.

In such student-led combat strategies, two stood out among the close combat specialists.

Cliffman, who possessed combat talent, and Ludwig, who possessed physical talent.

The soldiers knew that Ellen's level had become exceedingly high, but they also recognized the incredible skills of the other two.

"When do you think we'll advance next?"

In response to Ludwig's question, Ellen ponders for a moment while chewing on a piece of bread.

"Perhaps about four days from now… I think."

"Four days… I see."

Ellen doesn't know Ludwig very well.

However, she knows him as someone with a cheerful demeanor and a pure innocence that could be somewhat infuriating at times.

But at some point, Ludwig stopped smiling altogether.

The horrors of war.

And the fact that the Demon King had been by their side all this time, unbeknownst to them.

Because of this, Ludwig lost his smile. He not only lost his smile, but his expression and eyes were filled with anger and hatred.

Not long after the start of their march.

During the defense of the garrison, Asher of B-4, a talent in holy power, died.

Since then, the light of hatred and anger in Ludwig's eyes never seemed to fade.

CHAPTER 507

Someone was bound to die.

Countless people had already perished, and the Royal Class students were no exception.

A swarm of flying monsters attacked the rear area, where the injured were being treated after the base defense battle.

Asher was torn to pieces by the monsters and died on the spot.

It wasn't that long ago.

Since Asher's death, the gloom and sensitivity that pervaded the Royal Class garrison had only intensified.

A classmate had died.

Everyone knew that death was inevitable in the Gate incident and war, but the death of a close friend was undoubtedly shocking to all.

Everyone was consumed by grief, and some still were.

But what Ellen felt from Ludwig's gaze was not sadness.

Amidst emotions sublimated by anger and hatred, Ellen could only intuit that Ludwig sought revenge.

Although she hadn't witnessed Asher's death, Ellen was equally shocked.

Instead of resentment and hatred, guilt returned to Ellen from that death.

When this final advance ends, who will be dead, and who will be alive?

Prak

Ludwig put down the sausage he'd bitten into on the plate.

"You."

“…Yes?"

"Last time, when Reinhardt came to the Imperial Capital."

At those words, Ellen felt her heart tighten.

The Demon King's attack on the Imperial Capital, and the abduction of the princess.

No one was unaware of that story. The damage was severe, but the morale of the empire skyrocketed because the story ended with Ellen repelling the Demon King.

Ludwig talked about that incident.

The one that had inevitably left a deep scar in Ellen's heart.

"It's not like you… deliberately didn't fight properly… right?"

At that, Ellen's hand trembled slightly.

"…”

In Ludwig's gaze, Ellen felt as if she was being interrogated. After staring at Ellen for a moment, Ludwig lowered his head.

“…No, that can't be. You wouldn't do that."

"…”

Ludwig stared at Ellen with deep, dark eyes.

"It couldn't be. Right?"

"…”

"You are the Hero. Chosen by two sacred relics, and chosen by the gods to defeat the Demon King."

Ludwig looked at Ellen and said,

"Hero."

To Ellen, Ludwig's words sounded like a threat.

"Sorry, I overstepped. It's not my place. How dare I, someone like me, question you."

As he muttered to himself, Ellen felt chills run down her spine.

"I've never defeated Reinhardt even once."

As if to say, defeating the Demon King isn't something I can do.

With that, Ludwig gazed at Ellen.

"But you've always been stronger than Reinhardt. So, it's kind of… strange…"

What I can't do and haven't done.

What you can do but haven't.

It was a piercing gaze, seemingly questioning if that was the case.

"Ludwig."

"…Ah, Scarlett."

The red-haired girl, who had been calmly eating next to him, called Ludwig.

"Don't burden Ellen."

"…"

"She should at least be comfortable here. Ellen is the one struggling the most."

Ellen was already under tremendous pressure from many places.

With Scarlett's words, cautioning Ludwig not to add to that burden even here, he slowly nodded his head.

"Yes. You're right."

Ludwig looked at Ellen.

"Sorry, Ellen. I made you uncomfortable."

Ellen bowed her head and shook it from side to side.

"No… it's alright."

Ellen stared blankly at the bread in her hand, not saying anything more.

In the end, she couldn't bring herself to eat properly.

Ellen's quarters at the Royal Class garrison were not particularly the largest.

The largest quarters belonged to Adelia and Christina, who possessed talents in alchemy. Due to the need for equipment for magical research, setting up and dismantling their quarters required considerable manpower. Just their personal research materials alone required several carriages.

Adelia did not participate in combat herself, but the artifacts she developed and improved were most important in large-scale battles.

Christina and Adelia.

If the Gate incident were to be completely resolved and humanity could rebuild its history, their names would have been mentioned alongside Ellen's.

They had many research materials they needed, while Ellen, apart from two relics, didn't have any personal items she particularly needed.

Ellen never had an interest in decorating her room anyway.

Therefore, Ellen's tent was quite spacious, divided into sections, and provided maximum convenience, but it was not extravagant.

Night fell over the garrison.

Ellen quickly removed her plate armor upon arriving at her quarters.

-Clank-

The seams of the armor released automatically, floating in midair before reassembling on the stand. Ellen watched the process silently.

Armor like this typically required assistance to put on and take off, but the specially crafted silver plate didn't need that.

"Phew…"

Although the armor was designed to ensure maximum mobility, it was inevitably uncomfortable.

The actual discomfort was less of an issue than the suffocating feeling of wearing such ornate armor.

Ellen sat motionless in the bathtub in the tent used as a bathroom.

Several times.

Ellen submerged her face in the hot water, repeatedly.

Pressing her temples with her thumb and forefinger, Ellen took deep breaths.

"Sigh…"

Again and again.

"Sigh…"

Again and again.

The pressure made her feel like she was suffocating to death several times a day.

It was true that she managed to accomplish whatever tasks she could.

Being more skilled and capable than others, she was actually handling more burdensome tasks than most. That was a fact.

However, people's expectations were too high and vast.

And the ultimate goal of those people was something she didn't want to do with her own hands.

Would it be better to just die?

Disappear from the world?

Wouldn't she be free from these emotions if she died during a mission?

Ellen had those thoughts dozens of times a day.

But she knew clearly that she couldn't allow herself that luxury.

She had to live.

Her existence alone prevented people from losing hope. She couldn't die.

Even if there was some end she had to face while alive, she had to be alive until that moment.

Even if she didn't know what to do.

She had to stay alive, no matter what.

Ellen resolved herself.

The future might be desperate, but it was a desperate future only for her.

First, she had to finish the march.

Destroying the Warp Gates on the continent would only be a good thing for the entire world and was something she had to do.

At least until then.

She would think about the next thing when it came.

"Phew…”

Ellen took a deep breath, trying to calm her chaotic and dark thoughts.

After sufficiently calming her mind, Ellen finished her bath and changed into fresh clothes.

Once her hair was reasonably dry, she wrapped a towel around herself and stepped into the central area of the tent, only to gasp in surprise.

"!"

Although she was fully dressed, Ellen reflexively tightened the collar of her shirt as she stared at the uninvited guest who had entered without warning.

Ellen's tent was protected by magic, preventing unauthorized entry when the lock was activated. There had undoubtedly been some rude individuals who had tried to barge into the tent anyway.

But now, someone had entered her locked tent.

A robed figure with a slightly small stature sat as if waiting for Ellen.

“…Who are you?"

Sensing danger, Ellen immediately summoned Lapelt and Lament and aimed them at the mysterious figure.

But soon, Ellen found herself involuntarily gaping.

The robed person removed their hood.

"It's been a while… or maybe not."

"Harriet…?"

Harriet de Saint Owan gazed at Ellen with a sorrowful expression.

Months ago, Harriet and Ellen had crossed paths.

During the Demon King's assault on the capital, Ellen and Harriet had briefly locked eyes.

Of course, they hadn't spoken.

Inside Ellen's tent.

Harriet looked at Ellen with a sad expression.

Harriet had come looking for her. Ellen had unsummoned Lament, but they stood at a slight distance from each other.

They were friends.

After Reinhardt's disappearance and various other events, Ellen and Harriet had become close enough to call each other friends.

Harriet had disliked Reinhardt, but when he disappeared, she had cried in the rain.

Ellen had thought that her harsh words had driven Reinhardt away.

Together, they had searched for the missing Reinhardt.

That had brought them together as friends.

And now.

Because of Reinhardt, they had become friends, but they also couldn't call each other friends, stuck in a strange relationship.

Ellen still didn't know why Harriet had come like this.

But she couldn't help but wonder.

Are we still friends?

Ellen cast her eyes downward.

Harriet seemed to have similar thoughts, unable to meet Ellen's gaze.

"It's not the right time, but…”

Harriet cautiously spoke up.

"Do you want to go for a walk?"

"…”

The surroundings had already been cleared.

"Yes."

"I'll be waiting for you at the outskirts of the southern garrison."

Ellen nodded silently, and Harriet disappeared through spatial teleportation.

Following Harriet's suggestion, Ellen ventured out to the southern outskirts of the garrison. No one stopped her.

In the southern outskirts, Harriet was waiting for Ellen on a moonlit plain.

Harriet and Ellen walked across the moonlit plain.

Monsters' corpses were scattered here and there.

After a brief rest, the troops would clear the surrounding monsters and move on. They would carry out a gate destruction operation at the next destination and then head to the following gate.

Humanity's last army would continue to move until the final gate was destroyed.

"It's not the right time to ask… how you've been."

Harriet seemed about to speak of her well-being but chuckled bitterly, thinking it

was too strange.

Like Reinhardt, Harriet had been watching over the human world, including the capital, from somewhere.

Ellen had many questions she wanted to ask. Where had they been and what had they been doing all this time? Were they all doing well, somehow, in this wretched world?

But Ellen thought she had no right to ask such questions, so she couldn't bring herself to voice her doubts.

The two walked for a while without much conversation.

The very act of choosing what to say when facing each other already meant that they had grown too far apart.

No one else should witness them exchanging words like this.

Harriet was not the Demon King, but she was met with a hatred that was nearly equivalent.

This alliance army was humanity's last and strongest force.

Therefore, there were both high-ranking officials and magicians at the base.

Ellen knew the situation of a high-ranking official who was despised because of his daughter’s betrayal of humanity.

He was an outstanding magician, already doing incredible work, but he was treated as a potential spy, prepared to betray them at any moment, by soldiers and even commanders.

Harriet must have known that her father and his army were stationed at that base.

"How are our classmates… doing well?"

Harriet asked about their classmates rather than her father.

Ellen felt like she couldn't breathe at the question.

Until now, everyone had managed to survive, somehow.

But there was one person.

"Asher… has died."

"Ah…"

Asher was not particularly close to either Ellen or Harriet.

Class B, number 4.

Asher, who had the talent for divine power.

Harriet knew only that he had a gentle face and a timid personality.

Ellen knew that, after the Gate incident, Asher had saved many people with his talent, even though he wasn't directly involved in combat.

Though they weren't close, the death of a classmate.

Harriet walked silently, her expression lost upon hearing the news.

Their classmates' deaths were just the beginning, whether by accidents or the overwhelming number of monsters.

One by one.

They would die.

Both Ellen and Harriet knew that it was their fate.

Harriet didn't pray for his soul nor did she cry for his death.

She just walked blankly for a while.

Usually, when meeting after a long time, they would start with casual conversation before getting to the main point.

But there was no such thing as a casual topic in this world.

If they brought up their classmates, they had to talk about the dead ones.

In the vicinity of the army base, deployed for war, it was difficult to find light-hearted conversation, and even if they tried, it would only make them feel disconnected from reality.

Starting with casual conversation before getting to the main point was impossible.

In the end, Harriet stopped, as if she had made up her mind.

In her eyes, there was depression and sadness.

An overwhelming sense of guilt for having to ask someone else to sacrifice themselves for something she couldn't take responsibility for or handle.

"Ellen."

"Yeah."

When Harriet stopped, Ellen stopped too.

"Reinhardt… he might die too."

“…What?"

For the first time, Ellen felt as if her heart had stopped due to someone's words.

With her face drained of color, Harriet began to tell her story.

Harriet couldn't tell the whole truth, since she couldn't discuss the most important story, about the Demon King's country built in the Edina Archipelago.

Feeling guilty about it.

There were far too many deaths in the world, and the grudges of the dead were gathering, growing larger and larger.

Olivia Lanze was once possessed by them, but the story goes that Reinhardt expelled those resentful spirits and absorbed them instead.

As a result, the Demon King was said to be slowly dying under the pressure of the spirits filled with hatred and resentment towards him.

Ellen was astonished by this fact.

She could only gape in disbelief at the incredible story of Reinhardt taking in these spirits, knowing the potential harm and damage it could cause.

After finishing her story, Harriet wiped the corner of her eyes.

Her eyes were bloodshot and red.

She wanted to do it herself if she could.

She wanted to find another way if there was one.

However, the sight of Reinhardt dying in real-time was a stark reminder that there wasn't much time left.

"I can't save him, so please save him for me."

She felt wretched, miserable, and shameless for having to say such words.

Someone else could have been sent.

Antirianus, who had proposed the idea, could have come himself.

But Harriet chose to come herself.

She couldn't relay such a request through someone else's lips.

At least not from a friend like her.

No matter how miserable and agonizing it was to say such words, she believed that she had to be the one to ask Ellen.

"Please… save Reinhardt. Save his life."

"…"

Ellen stared at the tearful Harriet.

How could she possibly save Reinhardt?

Ellen seemed to understand what Harriet was saying.

"If I can handle it… Will that work? I don't know the method, but… I can do it that way?"

"…"

Harriet silently stared at Ellen.

-Nod

Unable to say it out loud, Harriet nodded her head while crying.

"I'll do it."

Without a moment's hesitation, Ellen nodded her head. Seeing Ellen agree without any doubts, Harriet was taken aback.

"Ellen… I know it's absurd for me to ask this, but… it's not a decision you should make so quickly."

"I'll do it."

"Ellen…"

Harriet had asked for it, but Ellen didn't know the specifics of what she would have to endure. That's why Harriet had to explain to Ellen how dangerous it was and what consequences it could bring.

"You could die. Your soul might disappear. You might be devoured by those spirits and your existence erased. Or you might become an entirely different being."

Death, or the annihilation of existence, or a permanent alteration of the self.

"In that case, I have one question."

“…Yes."

"If I take them into my body, and my body is controlled by those spirits… Will I… hate Reinhardt?"

Ellen Artorius would disappear, and a new Ellen Artorius, corroded by the spirits who despise the Demon King, would be born.

"Perhaps… that's what will happen."

"To the point where I want to kill him? So much so that I would actually try to kill him… is that what you're saying?"

"Maybe…”

The hero who loved the Demon King would disappear.

Only a puppet carrying hatred and resentment, wishing for the Demon King's death, would remain.

"Is that an absolute outcome?"

At Ellen's question, Harriet parted her lips.

A slim possibility.

She asked about the possibility that her self might not be annihilated but survive.

"I don't know… I don't know the details either… But just as Reinhardt is… holding on somehow right now… you might not disappear. But… I can't be certain. No one really knows what will happen…”

It could not be said with certainty that Ellen Artorius' ego would not remain intact as she merged with the vengeful spirits.

After all, Reinhardt had already accomplished the impossible, so it was possible that Ellen Artorius could achieve even greater feats.

There is no absolute.

Only an endless approach towards it.

Ellen ponders.

If she were to lose herself, she would one day have to battle Reinhardt.

Her body, consumed by the will to hate the Demon King, would attempt such a thing.

She certainly doesn't want that.

However, if she doesn't act now, Reinhardt will die.

There might be another way, but there isn't enough time to find it now, even if it exists.

To save Reinhardt, she must bear the hatred of humans. It is not a conceptual matter, but a tangible one.

To truly take in the hatred and resentment, and later become the Demon King's adversary.

If that can save Reinhardt.

To save him now, pushing the matters of the future aside.

Would it be alright if she disappeared?

Would it be alright if she died?

Is this how she pays the price of her disbelief?

It cannot be a complete atonement.

But with her life, she buys a small measure of absolution.

There is no guarantee that her existence will completely vanish.

Even if the chances are slim, there's no reason not to take them.

There is no guarantee that she will certainly die.

And the words she once said:

That she could die for him.

The time to keep that promise, beyond time itself, has come.

The moment to repay, even if only a little, the sin of distrust she committed against Reinhardt has arrived.

"I thought I could die for Reinhardt. All this time."

"But."

"Despite that."

"At a critical moment, I couldn't trust Reinhardt and caused him greater pain than death."

"For someone like me, someone like…"

Ellen smiles sadly.

"I'm grateful that I can at least do something like this."

"…"

"It's a relief, isn't it? That even someone like me, in a situation like this… can do something for Reinhardt."

Ellen looks at Harriet, who is on the verge of tears.

"I'm thankful that there's something I can do for Reinhardt."

In the end, Harriet, seeing Ellen like this, broke into tears.

CHAPTER 508

After bidding farewell to Harriet, Ellen returned to the garrison.

"In two days, at midnight, I'll be waiting for you in the southern field of the garrison."

Ellen didn't know exactly what she needed to do, but Harriet had disappeared after leaving those words.

She was both fearful and curious about the fate that awaited her.

Yet, she might disappear altogether, or assimilate with otherworldly souls, becoming the embodiment of the will to hate the Demon King and killing Reinhardt.

Ellen knew that it could be an option leading to her killing Reinhardt with her own hands.

However, if she didn't make such a choice, Reinhardt might die right away.

Saving Reinhardt now might come at the cost of killing him later with her own hands.

Just as there was no choice for Reinhardt, there was none for Ellen either.

Knowing that he couldn't bear it, Reinhardt tried to contain the grudges within himself, as the whole of Edina might be destroyed.

Similarly, Ellen had no choice but to take the path that would lead to destruction at the end, even if she knew it.

If her existence merged with another, and she was reborn as a hero who hated the Demon King, people would be pleased.

It was a bizarre way to overcome the disparity between reality and ideals.

Not that she would be happy about it.

Nor would she willingly accept the disappearance of her existence.

In the end, it was a matter of not encountering it.

Even if she became a hero who wanted to kill the Demon King, if the Gate incident was resolved and the Demon King was never found, she wouldn't be able to fight even if she wanted to.

Ellen walked across the garrison and returned to her tent.

Inside the tent, she sat blankly on her makeshift bed.

What would it feel like to have her existence vanish?

Having never died, Ellen didn't know what death was.

Thus, she didn't know what it meant for her existence to disappear while her body was alive.

She didn't know how to protect her existence.

All she could do was save Reinhardt.

Ellen decided to focus only on that.

Also.

She could see Reinhardt once more.

Ellen wiped her eyes quietly. Moisture clung to her fingers.

"…"

She carefully wiped away her tears, which were gradually flowing.

They had to meet as enemies and treat each other as such.

The thought of the moment they would meet again being an unavoidable situation where they had to aim for each other's lives filled her with despair.

But that reunion wasn't to face him as an enemy, but to save Reinhardt.

How grateful, thankful, and joyous that was, despite it being their last meeting.

Since monsters were rampant on the continent, the army would advance a certain distance, clear the surroundings, set up a garrison, clear the area again, and then proceed.

Once a garrison was established, there was usually some time until the safety of the march route was fully secured.

It also took time to set up and dismantle the garrison.

Hence, there were breaks between the tight marching schedules, and Ellen had some free time before the garrison was dismantled and the advance began.

Two days later, when most of the soldiers, except for those on night patrol and guard duty, were asleep, Ellen arrived alone at the time and place Harriet had mentioned.

Harriet was waiting for her there.

"You've arrived, Ellen."

Harriet still looked at Ellen with a sad gaze.

In the clearing, there was no one but Harriet.

Just like how Reinhardt had so calmly sacrificed himself to protect Edina.

Ellen, too, was willing to sacrifice herself without a moment's hesitation when she heard that Reinhardt could be saved.

She was prepared for that, and so was Harriet.

However, that didn't mean she could easily accept someone else calmly sacrificing themselves.

Ellen was sacrificed to save Reinhardt from being lost.

It was a proposal made by the Lord of Saturday, Antirianus.

Everyone knew that there was great malice mixed into that proposal.

Yet it was also true that everyone had agreed to it.

Ellen would naturally be willing to sacrifice herself for Reinhardt, and after all, she was destined to fight the Demon King eventually.

No one in Edina could bear the burden.

Everyone agreed to the cruel plan of turning someone who was going to become an enemy into a true enemy.

From the moment they agreed to Antirianus's plan, no one could be free from that malice.

The pain, guilt, and remorse that others would feel for agreeing to sacrifice Ellen would all be according to Antirianus's intentions.

No one could be free from the sin of sacrificing Ellen.

"We're going to the ritual site."

"Yeah."

Blue magical lines began to flow from Harriet's body, and soon, Harriet and Ellen were able to arrive at another location through teleportation.

Ellen didn't know what kind of place it was.

It was just a place with a massive magical circle.

Five beings stood at the parts corresponding to the axes of the magic circle.

The Lord of Tuesday, Eleris.

The Lord of Wednesday, Lucinil.

The Lord of Thursday, Luvien.

The Lord of Friday, Gallarush.

The Lord of Saturday, Antirianus.

Ellen didn't know all of their faces, but she could spot two familiar ones.

Upon seeing Ellen appear with Harriet, some of their gazes were filled with guilt.

And one old man looked at Ellen with a smug smile.

Ellen found his gaze somewhat chilling.

And that wasn't all.

Not only were Harriet and the other Vampire Lords present, but Liana de Grantz and Olivia Lanze were there as well.

Both were faces Ellen hadn't seen in a very long time.

Neither Liana nor Olivia could bear to look directly at Ellen.

Liana, because she was the cause of everything that had happened.

And because she knew she couldn't bear even a part of the pain Reinhardt was going through, she couldn't look directly at Ellen.

Amidst the complicated emotions, Olivia couldn't look directly at Ellen either.

It wasn't because Ellen could bear this, but because it was merely a passing of responsibility.

Though she might be an extraordinary being, the risk of her ego disappearing even if her physical body didn't collapse was clear.

Did that fellow know what was happening to her?

For the first time in her life, Olivia felt something similar to pity towards Ellen.

They didn't exchange any greetings.

It wasn't a situation where they could do so.

Their gazes were inevitably drawn to the center of the magical circle, where the five Archmages stood.

Ellen didn't know what this magical circle and its ritual meant.

However, in the center,

Reinhardt lay on what appeared to be an altar for the ritual.

She couldn't tell if he was asleep or unconscious.

Next to the altar where the unconscious Reinhardt lay, a demon with pink hair gently stroked his forehead over and over.

Ellen did not know that the succubus queen had deliberately put Reinhardt to sleep, preventing him from waking up.

In this place, there were faces Ellen knew and faces she didn't.

There was no need to exchange pleasantries, the joy or sorrow of reunions, or any other words.

"When you're ready, go to the central altar of the circle."

The silver-haired girl, Lucinil, said softly.

Lucinil, who had mastered the magic of handling souls, had created the circle.

She had never attempted magic of this scale before, transferring souls of this magnitude to other bodies.

However, she had squeezed every bit of her knowledge to complete this circle.

"Ellen…”

As Ellen moved towards the circle, Harriet softly called her name.

Liana de Grantz and Olivia Lanze also looked at Ellen.

None of the three could say anything to Ellen. No one knew how Ellen, who had taken on the burden Reinhardt bore, would change.

“…I'll go."

Leaving behind that single ambiguous word, Ellen walked toward the center of the circle, leaving Harriet behind.

As Ellen arrived at the altar, the pink-haired demon silently stood up and retreated outside the circle.

As if entrusting Reinhardt to her.

Even at a glance, Ellen could tell that Reinhardt's condition was very poor.

She knew what it meant to be dying from his white, parched lips, pale complexion, and cold sweat on his forehead.

"Rein… hardt…”

Ellen sat down at the altar and held Reinhardt in her arms.

This encounter was different from before.

Unlike the theatrical battle they had fought, Reinhardt was now frail.

Ellen didn't know what burden he was carrying, or how heavy it was.

All she knew was that she had to bear it in his stead.

She was prepared to do so, no matter what.

Reinhardt, who was lying deep in sleep on Ellen's lap, was now in her care.

The ritual begins.

Following the silver-haired girl's words, the five Vampire Lords began to activate something in the circle.

Olivia Lanze, too, summoned Tiamata to be on guard for any unforeseen

circumstances during the ritual.

Within the shining circle, Ellen stared intently at Reinhardt's face.

Was this the end?

Was this really the end?

She had wished to do something for him and actually had been able to.

It might not be the last.

But, because it might be the last…

Ellen bowed her head towards Reinhardt and pressed her lips to his forehead.

How fortunate to be able to hold him like this.

How grateful she should be.

Thinking so,

Since it was the last.

Since he was asleep.

She could tell him what she had wanted to say.

"How much pain you're in."

Until the last moment when the ritual was maintained.

She could talk endlessly.

Ellen looked at the unconscious Reinhardt with a sad gaze.

"All the things that trouble you."

During the course of the ritual.

"I'll… I'll take them all."

Ellen whispered her true feelings, which she had wanted to tell Reinhardt countless times.

Her guilt and apologies.

And her affection for him.

"I really, truly love you."

She whispered forevermore.

He had lost consciousness frequently.

He wasn't unaware that his body and soul were gradually becoming sick and withering.

He thought that the task he had to bear was something he had to endure himself.

He believed there was no other way.

Because someone had to deal with that massive black hole of resentment that grew and multiplied if left alone.

So, in his dying state now, he knew he had to find another way, but he couldn't leave it alone

With all her remaining strength, Ellen finally managed to lift the corners of her lips.

Ellen smiled at him.

As if it were the last time.

"Goodbye, Reinhardt."

She bade farewell as if this was their last meeting.

Along with her words, another spell activated from the circle.

-Flash!

With a burst of light, Ellen's figure disappeared.

In a space he could not recognize, he slowly scanned the faces of those present.

The Vampire Lords.

Liana.

Olivia.

Harriet.

Airi.

All of them dared not to meet his eyes.

Only Antirianus, with a satisfied expression, stared at the spot where Ellen had vanished.

Ellen Artorius reappeared in the southern plains of the garrison where she had encountered Harriet.

Because no one knew what action Ellen, who had absorbed a massive amount of vengeful spirits, would take, the ritual's completion involved sending her away as soon as it ended.

Ellen stood still in the field as night fell.

She felt, with her entire body and soul, the burdens that Reinhardt had been carrying all this time.

Hatred.

Vengefulness.

The echoes of resentment, which seemed to have amplified all the negative emotions in the world by tens of thousands of times, were enough to drive one to the brink of madness just by hearing them.

Could she bear this?

Could she remain herself amidst this tidal wave of resentment?

Was it possible to protect her feelings for Reinhardt, floating like a piece of driftwood in this overwhelmingly massive wave of emotions?

Her heart was too small; it would be swept away by the waves and sink, disappearing.

Ellen felt her thoughts becoming polluted.

The Demon King must die.

The Demon King was the root of all problems.

There was no use in screaming otherwise.

In a situation where too many entities had already entered her soul, the truth Ellen cried out would only be buried under the waves of resentment.

These vengeful spirits couldn't enter the Demon King's body and kill him.

They merely inhabited the body of the hero who opposed the Demon King.

What change would that bring about?

-Grrrrr!

-Roarrrrrr!

The distant cries of monsters reached her ears.

Monsters were everywhere, so it was only natural for new ones to appear from somewhere, even if the safety of the marching route had been secured.

There were about seventy of them.

All different in appearance, Ellen saw the monsters swarm toward her.

-Swoosh!

As she drew out Lament, the Void Sword was dyed with the darkness of the abyss.

Like a projection of the night sky, the Void Sword Lament, in which one could see the movement of galaxies and stars within, had changed slightly.

The abyss.

Only the abyss was projected in the pitch-black Void Sword, showing that the sadness Ellen felt had now killed even the shining stars within that sadness.

A sword projecting only darkness, not the night sky.

Holding it, Ellen gazed at the approaching horde of monsters.

On Ellen's shoulders, the Cloak of the Sun God draped itself.

The Cloak of the Sun God, possessing the power of protection.

Its color was somewhat strange.

As if projecting the boiling hellfire of the sun, the Cloak of the Sun God shone a deep red and fluttered menacingly.

No, in fact, hellish flames began to flicker and burn like tongues from the Cloak of the Sun God.

In addition to sorrow.

Hatred.

Ellen stared silently at the approaching horde of monsters.

-Grrr! Grrr!

As if alive and moving, the undulating flames actually flowed out from the cloak.

The monsters couldn't even approach Ellen.

Boom! Crackle-crash!

As if alive, the whips of flame extending from the Cloak of the Sun struck the ground, crushing and incinerating the oncoming monsters.

With a single lash, the earth melted and the bright red flames gradually spread out. Ellen watched silently.

Fueled by hatred.

The hero carried the hatred and sorrow of humanity on her back.

The Demon King must die.

No, that cannot happen.

In the vortex of souls, just as Reinhardt had done.

The will of Ellen Artorius began to die as well.

However, unlike trying to kill the Demon King's spirit and eventually its physical form,

The vengeful spirits imbued Ellen Artorius with immense power.

Being the one who must kill the Demon King, they had to become even stronger.

Therefore, unlike when they possessed other beings, the spirits did not try to destroy Ellen.

On the contrary, in some ways, they became Ellen's strength.

Ellen reached her hand towards the sky.

Boom! Crack-crash! Krrrshhh!

The surviving monsters charging toward her were incinerated by the torrent of flames pouring down from the sky.

Flames that melted the earth.

The fire of hatred.

"…”

Ellen Artorius had become the master of that hatred.

CHAPTER 509

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Though she might be an extraordinary being, the risk of her ego disappearing even if her physical body didn't collapse was clear.

Did that fellow know what was happening to her?

For the first time in her life, Olivia felt something similar to pity towards Ellen.

They didn't exchange any greetings.

It wasn't a situation where they could do so.

Their gazes were inevitably drawn to the center of the magical circle, where the five Archmages stood.

Ellen didn't know what this magical circle and its ritual meant.

However, in the center,

Reinhardt lay on what appeared to be an altar for the ritual.

She couldn't tell if he was asleep or unconscious.

Next to the altar where the unconscious Reinhardt lay, a demon with pink hair gently stroked his forehead over and over.

Ellen did not know that the succubus queen had deliberately put Reinhardt to sleep, preventing him from waking up.

In this place, there were faces Ellen knew and faces she didn't.

There was no need to exchange pleasantries, the joy or sorrow of reunions, or any other words.

"When you're ready, go to the central altar of the circle."

The silver-haired girl, Lucinil, said softly.

Lucinil, who had mastered the magic of handling souls, had created the circle.

She had never attempted magic of this scale before, transferring souls of this magnitude to other bodies.

However, she had squeezed every bit of her knowledge to complete this circle.

"Ellen…"

As Ellen moved towards the circle, Harriet softly called her name.

Liana de Grantz and Olivia Lanze also looked at Ellen.

None of the three could say anything to Ellen. No one knew how Ellen, who had taken on the burden Reinhardt bore, would change.

“…I'll go."

Leaving behind that single ambiguous word, Ellen walked toward the center of the circle, leaving Harriet behind.

As Ellen arrived at the altar, the pink-haired demon silently stood up and retreated outside the circle.

As if entrusting Reinhardt to her.

Even at a glance, Ellen could tell that Reinhardt's condition was very poor.

She knew what it meant to be dying from his white, parched lips, pale complexion, and cold sweat on his forehead.

"Rein… hardt…”

Ellen sat down at the altar and held Reinhardt in her arms.

This encounter was different from before.

Unlike the theatrical battle they had fought, Reinhardt was now frail.

Ellen didn't know what burden he was carrying, or how heavy it was.

All she knew was that she had to bear it in his stead.

She was prepared to do so, no matter what.

Reinhardt, who was lying deep in sleep on Ellen's lap, was now in her care.

The ritual begins.

Following the silver-haired girl's words, the five Vampire Lords began to activate something in the circle.

Olivia Lanze, too, summoned Tiamata to be on guard for any unforeseen

circumstances during the ritual.

Within the shining circle, Ellen stared intently at Reinhardt's face.

Was this the end?

Was this really the end?

She had wished to do something for him and actually had been able to.

It might not be the last.

But, because it might be the last…

Ellen bowed her head towards Reinhardt and pressed her lips to his forehead.

How fortunate to be able to hold him like this.

How grateful she should be.

Thinking so,

Since it was the last.

Since he was asleep.

She could tell him what she had wanted to say.

"How much pain you're in."

Until the last moment when the ritual was maintained.

She could talk endlessly.

Ellen looked at the unconscious Reinhardt with a sad gaze.

"All the things that trouble you."

During the course of the ritual.

"I'll… I'll take them all."

Ellen whispered her true feelings, which she had wanted to tell Reinhardt countless times.

Her guilt and apologies.

And her affection for him.

"I really, truly love you."

She whispered forevermore.

He had lost consciousness frequently.

He wasn't unaware that his body and soul were gradually becoming sick and withering.

He thought that the task he had to bear was something he had to endure himself.

He believed there was no other way.

Because someone had to deal with that massive black hole of resentment that grew and multiplied if left alone.

So, in his dying state now, he knew he had to find another way, but he couldn't leave it alone

With all her remaining strength, Ellen finally managed to lift the corners of her lips.

Ellen smiled at him.

As if it were the last time.

"Goodbye, Reinhardt."

She bade farewell as if this was their last meeting.

Along with her words, another spell activated from the circle.

-Flash!

With a burst of light, Ellen's figure disappeared.

In a space he could not recognize, he slowly scanned the faces of those present.

The Vampire Lords.

Liana.

Olivia.

Harriet.

Airi.

All of them dared not to meet his eyes.

Only Antirianus, with a satisfied expression, stared at the spot where Ellen had vanished.

Ellen Artorius reappeared in the southern plains of the garrison where she had encountered Harriet.

Because no one knew what action Ellen, who had absorbed a massive amount of vengeful spirits, would take, the ritual's completion involved sending her away as soon as it ended.

Ellen stood still in the field as night fell.

She felt, with her entire body and soul, the burdens that Reinhardt had been carrying all this time.

Hatred.

Vengefulness.

The echoes of resentment, which seemed to have amplified all the negative emotions in the world by tens of thousands of times, were enough to drive one to the brink of madness just by hearing them.

Could she bear this?

Could she remain herself amidst this tidal wave of resentment?

Was it possible to protect her feelings for Reinhardt, floating like a piece of driftwood in this overwhelmingly massive wave of emotions?

Her heart was too small; it would be swept away by the waves and sink, disappearing.

Ellen felt her thoughts becoming polluted.

The Demon King must die.

The Demon King was the root of all problems.

There was no use in screaming otherwise.

In a situation where too many entities had already entered her soul, the truth Ellen cried out would only be buried under the waves of resentment.

These vengeful spirits couldn't enter the Demon King's body and kill him.

They merely inhabited the body of the hero who opposed the Demon King.

What change would that bring about?

-Grrrrr!

-Roarrrrrr!

The distant cries of monsters reached her ears.

Monsters were everywhere, so it was only natural for new ones to appear from somewhere, even if the safety of the marching route had been secured.

There were about seventy of them.

All different in appearance, Ellen saw the monsters swarm toward her.

-Swoosh!

As she drew out Lament, the Void Sword was dyed with the darkness of the abyss.

Like a projection of the night sky, the Void Sword Lament, in which one could see the movement of galaxies and stars within, had changed slightly.

The abyss.

Only the abyss was projected in the pitch-black Void Sword, showing that the sadness Ellen felt had now killed even the shining stars within that sadness.

A sword projecting only darkness, not the night sky.

Holding it, Ellen gazed at the approaching horde of monsters.

On Ellen's shoulders, the Cloak of the Sun God draped itself.

The Cloak of the Sun God, possessing the power of protection.

Its color was somewhat strange.

As if projecting the boiling hellfire of the sun, the Cloak of the Sun God shone a deep red and fluttered menacingly.

No, in fact, hellish flames began to flicker and burn like tongues from the Cloak of the Sun God.

In addition to sorrow.

Hatred.

Ellen stared silently at the approaching horde of monsters.

-Grrr! Grrr!

As if alive and moving, the undulating flames actually flowed out from the cloak.

The monsters couldn't even approach Ellen.

Boom! Crackle-crash!

As if alive, the whips of flame extending from the Cloak of the Sun struck the ground, crushing and incinerating the oncoming monsters.

With a single lash, the earth melted and the bright red flames gradually spread out. Ellen watched silently.

Fueled by hatred.

The hero carried the hatred and sorrow of humanity on her back.

The Demon King must die.

No, that cannot happen.

In the vortex of souls, just as Reinhardt had done.

The will of Ellen Artorius began to die as well.

However, unlike trying to kill the Demon King's spirit and eventually its physical form,

The vengeful spirits imbued Ellen Artorius with immense power.

Being the one who must kill the Demon King, they had to become even stronger.

Therefore, unlike when they possessed other beings, the spirits did not try to destroy Ellen.

On the contrary, in some ways, they became Ellen's strength.

Ellen reached her hand towards the sky.

Boom! Crack-crash! Krrrshhh!

The surviving monsters charging toward her were incinerated by the torrent of flames pouring down from the sky.

Flames that melted the earth.

The fire of hatred.

"…”

Ellen Artorius had become the master of that hatred.

CHAPTER 510

The Demon King called for a meeting.

In the conference room of the Lazak palace.

With all the high-ranking officials, including the Elders and the Regent, gathered in one place, the Demon King gave a brief order.

"Organize an elite squad."

Reinhardt did not mention a word about Ellen Artorius's actions, as if intending to discuss the future, rather than debating the blame or merits of everything that had happened so far.

"The objective is to take preemptive measures against the monsters on the alliance army's route."

Fort Mokna was being evacuated, and Edina didn't require much military force for defense, leaving a considerable number of troops available.

Although a significant number of knights and priests were lost during the previous purification operation, Edina's power was not limited to that.

A considerable number of troops remained.

The last human army was now marching to destroy the gates.

However, their speed was admittedly slow.

They advanced a certain distance, then focused on establishing garrisons and securing the surrounding routes. This process of advancing and setting up garrisons was repeated continually.

It was inevitable as the entire continent was in danger.

"The faster the troop advances, the quicker we can respond to each gate. This will

allow us to end the gate crisis a little sooner."

Thus, the Demon King's army would go ahead and do the same work as the imperial scouts and extermination squads.

In other words, they would be an escort force, clearing the path even before the alliance army knew of their existence.

"By securing the route, will we also cooperate in the gate destruction operation?"

At Regent Charlotte's question, the Demon King slightly shook his head.

"It will depend on the situation. If we encounter them clumsily, they might attack us. There might be situations where we can help and where we need to withdraw."

Harriet nodded at the Demon King's words.

"Right, if we're not careful, it could turn into a three-way battle. That would be worse than not doing anything at all."

If the human army detected the Demon King's forces while the gate destruction was a priority, an unexpected situation could arise.

So, they would move in a way that supported the human army from a hidden position.

Simply clearing the advance route would be a massive operation in itself.

They would leave the gates to the humans, helping only when necessary, but their primary mission was to secure the route's safety.

"If the situation is unfavorable, we can always secretly negotiate with the Emperor."

The complete resolution of the gate crisis was necessary for both the Empire and Edina. Therefore, it was entirely possible to conduct such negotiations secretly, keeping ordinary soldiers unaware.

"Please take charge of organizing the army, sister."

The Demon King spoke, looking at Olivia Lanze.

As the Holy Order occupied most of Edina's military forces, it was better for Olivia Lanze to be in charge of organizing the army.

"Okay, I understand."

With a firm expression, Olivia nodded her head.

"All of you Lords must cooperate in this operation as well. Is that possible?"

At the Demon King's words, the five Lords nodded their heads.

The Demon King did not mention anything that needed to be said.

Because of this, everyone felt somewhat guilty.

So, it was true that they all followed the Demon King's instructions and commands better than before.

In this way, everyone was working together towards the complete end of the gate crisis.

"The meeting is over. And Airi, stay behind. We have something to discuss."

With the Demon King's succinct order, the meeting was adjourned, and as instructed, succubus queen Airi remained in the conference room.

Airi approached the Demon King with a shiver.

Last time, it was Airi who had put Reinhardt to sleep.

That's why she was extremely tense, not knowing what to expect.

In their younger days, Airi and Valier had a rivalry.

In fact, it was Airi who used to beat Valier.

However, as time went by, Valier became the undisputed Demon King, possessing the abilities of one.

Having regained her horn and the ability to control her magic, Airi was now

incomparably stronger than when she had lost her horn, and she could use various powers.

Nevertheless, due to her past actions, Airi couldn't help but shrink like a mouse in front of a cat when the Demon King told her to stay.

Seeing the Demon King fall silent for a moment, Airi nervously opened her mouth.

"Um… I'm working on the thing you asked me to do last time…"

The implementation of dream magic as ordinary magic, and its artifactization.

Although it was an order given to Harriet, Airi had to cooperate, so she was already collaborating with Harriet on the matter.

"Really? Do you think it's possible?"

"I'm not sure yet. But the scribe… seems to have a grasp on something."

Implementing the unique power of demons as magic, which is not even demonic magic.

It was something they had never thought of before, but Harriet seemed to be catching on to what Reinhardt had asked her to do.

A country where everyone is guaranteed a comfortable place to dream.

It was uncertain whether it had a significant meaning, but it would undoubtedly be helpful to many people if there were many places with wounded individuals.

"I'm glad to hear that."

Seemingly unaware that things would turn out this way, the Demon King smiled.

But as if that wasn't the main issue, the Demon King looked at Airi.

"Anyway, now that there are no more refugee search operations, you won't have anything to do, right?"

"Huh? Oh… Yeah, I guess so."

Airi's primary mission was to take care of the mental state of those who had arrived in Edina, providing counseling and helping them dream.

She had been very busy during the early days of Edina's founding, but as the number of refugees decreased rapidly, Airi began to have more free time.

And now, with the complete suspension of Port Mokna's operation, no more refugees would arrive.

So, taking care of existing counseling and dreams could be left to other succubi.

In the long run, Airi might have to take on another position.

"Remember when you looked after my dream last time?"

"Ah… Yeah."

"It was quite good. Definitely."

The Demon King had never personally experienced what it meant for a succubus queen to take care of one's dream. The first time he had experienced that power was the last time.

Airi's power had a considerable influence in somehow keeping his dying spirit alive.

"So from now on, I'd like you to look after my dreams every day, if possible."

Airi seemed to finally understand what the Demon King was saying.

No matter how fine he pretended to be, his heart would be filled with confusion and anger.

Even though the vengeful spirits that tormented his soul and mind were gone, Ellen had taken them on.

So, the Demon King was merely holding back all his negative thoughts and words, and it must have been quite painful. The possibility of still having nightmares even with the vengeful spirits gone was very high.

Therefore, asking her to look after his dreams was something she could do without

hesitation.

"It's not a reproach or a criticism, but a request for help."

"Sure, I can do that. I'll make you have pleasant dreams."

Airi vigorously nodded her head at the thought that she could do something to help.

It wasn't to absorb energy, but to help Reinhardt regain his peace of mind within tranquil dreams.

Upon hearing Airi's words, the Demon King lowered his head.

"Hmm… I appreciate the thought, but I want something different."

“…Different?"

The Demon King looked at Airi.

"I don't want pleasant dreams. I want nightmares."

“…What?"

Airi felt as if her mind was freezing at the Demon King's calm statement.

Not peaceful dreams, but nightmares.

To desire such a thing.

But why?

"Make me dream of Ellen trying to kill me. Every day."

Airi couldn't comprehend what she had just heard.

Thanks to Airi's power, I was able to somehow hold onto my fragile mind.

But the vengeful spirits that had tried to break and devour me were no longer within

me; they had been transferred to Ellen.

So, I no longer needed to pursue that peaceful state of mind. I had already learned how to do that from Rezaira.

Succubi are dream demons.

Dream demons traditionally enter someone's dreams to absorb their energy.

Reina, the previous Succubus Queen, had prevented countless soldiers from waking up with this method. Soldiers who couldn't overcome their drowsiness couldn't concentrate in battle, and once they fell asleep, the Succubus Queen drained their energy, rendering them unable to wake up again.

Now, our succubi, including Airi, use their powers in a way that deviates significantly from their original purpose.

Originally intended to seduce and absorb energy, their powers are now used to help people find peace of mind.

Then the opposite should be possible too.

If they can give someone pleasant dreams without absorbing their energy…

Then they should also be able to give someone nightmares without absorbing their energy.

In the moment when I have to fight for my life against Ellen,

I must become accustomed to that very moment.

Even if it's just happening in a dream, I need to become familiar with it, so I can remain calm in that situation, and changing the future can begin from there.

From that day on,

Airi began to watch over Harriet and me in the bedroom where we slept.

Airi and Harriet looked at me with pity when I requested to have nightmares on purpose.

They must know what I'm trying to endure through this.

There's no such thing as a predetermined future.

There are only futures that can be determined.

I will change the future.

I've changed it many times before.

Though I now know that very important futures never change.

I will change it.

"How… should we do this?"

"What do you mean?"

Airi looked at me with trembling eyes as I asked.

"Do you want to make the pain… and things like that… not be felt, or make them weaker…?"

"Make them stronger."

"…"

Airi bit her lip slightly, as if she had expected me to say that, while looking down at me lying on the bed.

It's a fight within a dream, injuries within a dream, and death within a dream.

As long as no one is actually harmed, the more pain, the better.

Her eyes seemed to ask if I really had to go this far.

Airi placed her hand on my forehead.

Airi's touch on my forehead was warm.

But that hand would soon plunge me into a deep nightmare I wouldn't even want to think about.

The Succubus Queen

If Airi held malicious intent while putting someone to sleep, she could potentially trap them in a never-ending slumber, regardless of whether or not she absorbed their energy.

"Sleep well… Valier."

Airi's trembling voice reached my ears.

And then, I was plunged into a deep sleep.

Dreams, by their very nature, are typically devoid of self-awareness.

Once you become aware, your brain awakens, and you are pulled back into reality.

Consciously dreaming, or lucid dreaming, is a difficult skill to master, and even harder to control.

But the dream I was experiencing now was very special. In a dream controlled by the Succubus Queen, I was essentially experiencing a lucid dream.

I found myself in an expansive reed marsh.

It appeared to be daytime.

Autumn, perhaps.

The time, season, and location were all uncertain.

I couldn't tell whether this was Airi's creation or a product of my own mind.

But I thought it was probably the latter.

I had asked Airi to make me dream of a nightmare where Ellen tried to kill me.

However, Airi knew little about Ellen.

Thus, the Ellen in my dream would be based on my understanding of her.

The Ellen I imagined—Ellen Artorius.

Such an Ellen would be driven by the intent to kill me.

If Ellen were to lose her sense of self, becoming a puppet driven solely by the desire for the Demon King's death due to the spirits inhabiting her.

The Ellen I would face now, and the Ellen I would face later, would be the same entity, disregarding their actual abilities.

A hollow shell of Ellen, devoid of her ego, intent only on killing me.

I summoned this entity in my dream.

And later, I might have to face such an Ellen in reality.

-Swoosh!

Amidst the obscuring reed marsh, a figure leaped out.

In midair, Ellen, armed with her Void Sword and the Sun's Cloak, struck down at me.

-Crash!

Barely dodging, the shockwave of her attack sent a portion of the reed marsh flying.

The dream Ellen Artorius, with her empty gaze, charged straight at me.

-Clang!

As my Aura Blade met her Void Sword, another shockwave erupted, and this time both Ellen and I were repelled by the force.

The Ellen I imagined.

I had never truly defeated her.

How much of a difference was there between the real Ellen and the dream Ellen's abilities?

I still remember the inscription on Lapelt.

"Born from hatred, made immortal."

An Ellen burdened with the world's hatred.

Ellen could now wield the true power of Lapelt.

What that power was, I didn't know.

Perhaps it was related to flames; I could only hazard a guess.

So I didn't know much about the current Ellen.

Thus, the dream Ellen would be weaker than the real one.

I didn't know how powerful Ellen would be once she harnessed the true power of the two relics.

-Swoosh!

The Void Sword thrust from between the reeds, aimed straight at my heart.

I parried it with my Alsbringer, aiming for her throat.

In this moment, I could strike down Ellen's neck.

Strike it down.

Even though it was a dream.

But was it right?

For me to do this?

To Ellen?

The moment I discovered my fear of even seeing Ellen die in a dream.

My sword slowed, and the strength in my grip waned.

The power in my sword weakened, and the dream entity didn't miss this fleeting hesitation.

In my moment of hesitation.

Seizing the opportunity, Ellen struck out with her left elbow, spinning around in a full circle.

As she swung her void sword along its trajectory, it returned to her.

Swish!

My head was severed.

I had died six times at the hands of Ellen.

The real Ellen would be stronger than my imagination, meaning that if a fight were to happen in the future, the predetermined vision of that future would unfold just as it was.

The reason I had died six times wasn't because the Ellen in my dreams was too strong.

I had faced Ellen countless times. Even if it was just in my imagination, clashing swords with Ellen was nothing new to me.

However, I felt how difficult it was for me to truly swing my sword against Ellen, who attacked me with the intention to kill.

It was just a dream, so hurting her wouldn't be an issue, but the moment my sword seemed to touch Ellen's body, my body would stiffen involuntarily.

The Ellen in my dreams was naturally moving to kill me, but I was afraid to hurt her even in my dreams.

Regardless of my own abilities or the strength of the Ellen in my imagination,

In a situation where I might sever Ellen's life, my body would freeze in fear.

Since it was a dream, it wouldn't affect the real world, so I shouldn't hesitate to hurt Ellen.

But what if I became too accustomed to that?

Could it result in me actually hurting Ellen or even taking her life?

My darkened vision returned.

This time, the backdrop was the Demon King's castle at night.

The central garden of the ruined Demon King's castle.

The place where the fight between Ragan Artorius and the previous Valier took place.

Across from me, Ellen looked at me, holding her void sword.

Snap!

In the end, there was no change in the fact that I had to become accustomed to this situation while having such dreams.

Clang!

The impact of the Void Sword and the Alsbringer colliding sent a shockwave through the air, scattering stone dust.

CHAPTER 511

After the twentieth time, I stopped counting.

I couldn't subdue Ellen even once.

The pain amplified in my dreams was more agonizing than actual wounds, but I didn't wake up because of it. Airi was controlling it artificially.

-Rumble

So when I woke up from my sleep, I could see the ominous thunder rolling through the clouded morning sky.

Is a storm coming?

I could feel Airi's hand still on me from just before I fell asleep.

"Did you sleep well…? Hmm, you probably didn't…"

Airi must have been concentrating on my dreams, so she must not have slept at all either. Perhaps because she kept seeing me die miserably in my dreams, her expression wasn't great.

Putting aside whether this method is good or not, there was one definite side effect when I woke up in the morning.

"Anyway… I don't feel refreshed at all."

"It can't be helped…"

I woke up tired.

It's only natural.

Dreams aren't usually experienced for hours on end.

But I had nightmares throughout my sleep, so my brain felt numb as if it was overloaded.

It seemed like a side effect of my brain doing more work while I was asleep.

If we keep doing this, both Airi and I will be exhausted when we need our strength the most.

Every day seems a bit too much; we should probably do this every other day or take a couple of days off in between.

Across the room, Harriet was asleep, hugging a large pillow tightly.

"Uh-huh… Reinhardt…”

Airi hadn't intervened in her dreams, but Harriet mumbled something in her sleep and hugged the pillow even tighter.

Our blockhead can sometimes be so cute that I want to bite her.

"Is this… going to be effective?"

Airi asked in a low voice, careful not to wake Harriet.

I was killed dozens of times in one night. The pain in the dream was more terrible than actual pain.

Compared to the otherworldly spiritual pain that almost devoured my soul, this pain seemed bearable.

But just because I've experienced pain doesn't mean a lesser pain isn't painful.

Luna once said that if you can heal easily, you develop a mindset that it's okay to get hurt easily too.

Since I've been in too much pain, I'm trying to endure this level of pain, which is definitely wrong from Luna's perspective.

I know that I can't buy future happiness with the pain I'm enduring now.

I know that for sure.

But I can't think of any other way.

To avoid the future where Ellen kills me and then ends up committing suicide, as I saw in the preview.

"I think it's necessary."

“…I see."

I'm trying to die a lot now.

"Anyway, let's sleep a bit more."

"Huh?"

"We should still get some proper sleep."

Airi placed her hand on my forehead again.

Since I didn't feel refreshed at all, I had to get at least a little proper sleep.

It must be painful for my dear one to intentionally make me have nightmares.

I could have resisted, but I entrusted my consciousness to her touch.

"I won't let you dream of anything this time."

In truth, both Airi and I knew that the best sleep was when you didn't have any dreams at all.

The elite forces of the Demon King's army, who could be considered the finest, began to gather.

The Vampire Council's leaders and their subordinate vampires.

The Priests and Holy Knights of the Holy Order.

And an army that included some of the most powerful beings among the demons.

Though their numbers were not large, a need for maximized mobility through mass teleportation led to the formation of an elite unit, each member possessing great strength.

The elite soldiers were handpicked by the noble families of the Vampire Lords, the leader of the Holy Order Olivia Lanze, and Regent Charlotte.

The Demon King would lead them to break through the march for the human armies.

An advance guard was being organized, unbeknownst to humanity itself.

-Grrrrrr

An unexpected storm had arrived in Lazak.

The waves grew higher, making it difficult to navigate the ships.

At the docks, people were bustling about, securing the ships more firmly to prevent them from being swept away. The mermaids, responsible for gathering marine resources, also reduced their activities.

At a villa on the outskirts of Lazak.

On the beach in front of it.

"My daughter, why are you sitting out here in the rain?"

Ellena de Grantz, the Duchess.

No, she was no longer the Duchess, but merely Ellena de Grantz, a woman who approached her daughter, who was sitting blankly on the beach in the rain.

"…"

Her daughter, better known by her nickname the Thunder Queen, said nothing and simply stared blankly at the waves shimmering in the distance.

There had been very few opportunities for her to see her mother due to her mission

in Port Mokna.

At this point, organizing the army was not within Liana's jurisdiction, so she had nothing to do until the Demon King issued further orders.

So Liana was spending a not-quite-vacation in one of the many villas once owned by the Grantz Duke throughout the continent and archipelagos, and now occupied by her mother on the outskirts of Lazak.

During her first summer break at the temple, Liana had spent a few days at the villa with her friends.

There was no going back to those days. Everything had changed too much.

The word "vacation" was unfamiliar to Liana.

She couldn't remember the last time she had properly rested.

She tried hard.

She tried hard at everything. She thought she had to do something, that there was no time to rest.

There had been many moments of critical decision-making, and Liana had made her choices.

And as a result of those choices.

Liana had brought about another massive disaster in an already tragic world, and she could not be held accountable for it.

Olivia Lanze had.

Reinhardt had.

And ultimately, Ellen Artorius had.

They all took on the origin of the sins committed by Liana.

Liana had nothing she could be responsible for.

Ellena looked at her daughter, who was just staring blankly at the seashore.

She had no title or authority in Edina. However, by the command of the Demon King, she maintained a certain standard of living, albeit not as luxurious as during her time as a duchess, and even had security.

Of course, Ellena knew what her daughter was doing and what important role she held.

Her daughter, whom she had hardly seen, stared blankly at the beach as soon as she returned home.

She was sitting in the pouring rain, getting soaked.

The mother couldn't gauge the extent of guilt in her daughter's eyes, but eventually, she set down her umbrella.

And then, she sat down beside her sitting, blank-faced daughter.

"Liana."

“…Yes."

"Is it very hard?"

"…”

At her mother's question, Liana turned her head slightly and stared at her mother.

"I don't deserve to be struggling."

"…”

"If I'm struggling, I shouldn't say it."

Liana says this and then turns her gaze back to the seashore. Ellena carefully places her hand on her daughter's wet shoulder.

"So, you're struggling that much."

"…"

"It's okay to cry if you're struggling."

She's struggling enough to say that she doesn't deserve to struggle.

It's okay to cry if you're struggling.

At her mother's words, Liana shakes her head.

"You can say that because you're my mother."

"Because I'm your mother, I can say that."

"If it was someone else… they wouldn't be able to say such a thing."

"I don't even have the right to cry."

They were a mother and daughter who had a terribly bad relationship.

But after the death of Duke Grantz and the Gate Incident, many things changed.

In the end, they are the only blood relatives left in the world.

How sad that is.

How fortunate that is, at least.

Now, they both know that fact painfully well.

Ellena doesn't know why her daughter is struggling so much.

"Well, I don't know exactly. I don't know why you're like this, but I guess I can say this because I'm your mother."

Ellena doesn't know what her daughter has done.

But she can read one thing in her daughter's eyes.

An indelible sense of guilt.

"So, no matter what you've done, even if you've committed an unforgivable act, even if you've made a huge mistake…”

"I am your mother."

"You are my daughter."

"You can cry in front of me."

"Even if you can't forgive yourself."

"Even if you think you don't have the right to cry."

"You can cry in front of me."

"That's why we're family."

At those words, Liana looks at Ellena.

Liana, who didn't allow herself to cry because she thought she didn't even have the right to shed tears.

She still can't forgive herself, and she doesn't know how to accept the countless deaths and damage caused by her actions.

She killed many people with her own hands.

And many people died because of that.

-Rumble

In the stormy beach, Liana finally breaks down in front of her mother's smile.

"Mother…”

"Yes."

"I've committed… an unforgivable sin."

"I see."

"I thought it would be unforgivable… but it was worse than I thought… worse than I had hoped… so many unimaginable things happened."

Ellena silently embraces her daughter, who begins to sob with a pitifully distorted face.

"I see…"

"Mother… I… I don't know… what to do…"

Ellena couldn't give her sobbing daughter an answer.

"I… I don't know if hating something, seeking revenge for Father, or being like me is right anymore…"

All she can do is embrace her daughter, who is crying with guilt, and cry with her.

"I see… my daughter. You were thinking… such thoughts…"

Holding her sobbing daughter in the rain, Ellena de Grantz strokes her daughter's wet hair and back.

She can't provide an answer, advice, or anything at all.

She can only hold her daughter and cry together.

That's what family is.

"Whimper… sob…"

The Thunder King, Liana de Grantz, weeps in her mother's arms.

The supernatural who controls lightning finally lets her held-back tears flow.

Then, the sky begins to clear.

The clouds that were once dark and gloomy disperse, and between them, a brilliant sun pours down, creating a miraculous sight.

Amidst the genuine tears, the heavy heart that wept manifested a heavy atmosphere.

The storm conjured by her supernatural powers disappeared within the depths of Liana's wailing.

Both Ellena and Liana had no choice but to gaze upon the surreal landscape, submerged in their tears.

It was Liana de Grantz, who had learned to control lightning in her fury.

Enveloped by sorrow and guilt, Liana's abilities took a step further.

"Uh… What did you say?"

I couldn't help but be dumbfounded upon hearing Liana's words.

"Remember that sudden storm last time? It just stopped."

"Yeah, it did, didn't it?"

The storm had begun out of nowhere, causing chaos for days, only to suddenly clear as if the sky had been torn apart.

It was such a strange phenomenon that not only I but also Lazak was quite alarmed.

Yet Liana came to me, claiming it was her doing.

"So, I'm not sure if the storm ended because of me or if it started because of me in the first place…"

"…"

"I know it sounds crazy. I know."

Was it because she could read the suspicion in my eyes, that she'd gone mad from the series of events? Liana's face flushed as she mumbled her confession.

"But the timing… What am I supposed to do about that? How am I supposed to handle it?"

"What's wrong with the timing?"

"Well… um… that's…"

Hesitant, Liana began to explain the events of the past few days to me.

In the end, she couldn't erase the guilt and remorse that clouded her face, and her eyes welled up as she choked back a sob.

She must have been utterly miserable.

The pain must have been enough to make her wish for death.

Seeing this side of Liana, who had always been strong and rough, was truly heart-wrenching.

Her explanation was lengthy, but the conclusion was this:

The storm had ceased when she had cried in her mother's embrace.

"I know it sounds ridiculous, but the timing… what am I supposed to do about it?!"

Liana's face was bright red, and she yelled, only to suddenly shrink back.

"I shouldn't be angry… Sorry…"

"Act as you usually do. I don't want to blame you, nor do I want to see you change."

It's even more uncomfortable seeing Liana so dejected.

"Hmm… So, we have to verify whether you can control the weather or if you're a delusional patient who thinks she can."

"Hey! Do you have to phrase it like that?"

"Anyway, I can tell for sure that your mental state isn't normal, since you're about to get angry but then stop yourself."

Seeing Liana, who was about to get angry but couldn't because she felt sorry for me, I was sure that she wasn't normal.

"Follow me. We need to check."

I grabbed Liana's arm and led her.

"If you really can control the weather, would doing it here be fine?"

People would go crazy, thinking the sky had gone mad.

Liana's thought could be a delusion.

The lump of emotions she held in her heart manifested as a storm, and when it dissipated, the weather cleared.

If someone told me such a story, I'd introduce them to Airi, telling them that they clearly had mental issues and should seek counseling.

However, the one who told me this story was none other than Liana de Grantz.

In the original work, Liana possessed the power specialized in lightning, but as the story unfolded differently from the original, her ability had become something beyond mere lightning.

She was now able to strike lightning in a clear sky.

Lightning.

An electric discharge from the sky.

The sky itself.

It wasn't impossible that Liana's power could evolve into something related to the weather.

If Liana's ability truly evolved to the point of causing weather changes, it was uncertain how she could use it later.

But first, it needed to be verified.

Naturally, she had to know if she could cause weather changes and to what extent it was possible.

It was impossible to do it in Lazak, so they had to move to an uninhabited area.

"A deserted island?"

"Yes, we need to verify something."

So, I took Liana and went to find Lucinil.

Initially, the Edina Archipelago was a place with numerous islands, so there were plenty of uninhabited ones.

Among them, one nameless island was located quite far from the inhabited ones.

Lucinil gathered information about the deserted island from the merfolk, checked its coordinates, and cast a mass teleport spell to travel there together.

"The view is nice."

This region was known for its emerald-colored sea.

Even during the temple era, people used to visit this place for summer vacations.

The peaceful scenery made it seem as if my heart was at ease, but the disparity between this and the tasks I had to accomplish, as well as the events unfolding on the continent, felt strange every time I experienced it.

"So, what are we supposed to do on this deserted island?"

Lucinil tilted her head as if asking what we were going to do after coming here.

I looked at Liana.

"I suspect Liana's power might have evolved further, so we're going to find out now."

"Evolved further?"

Lucinil tilted her head, wondering what could have evolved beyond her already incredible ability to summon lightning.

Yes, I was curious too.

We found the deserted island, but it was no different from any other sunny beach resort.

"Let's give it a try now, anyway."

Upon hearing my words, Liana scratched her cheek with an awkward expression.

"Well, you know…"

"What is it?"

"No, I mean… before I told you… I hadn't tried it myself…"

Ah.

I think I understood the problem.

"…You don't know how to use it?"

"…Yes."

Liana had some awareness that her power might have evolved, but she didn't know how to use it properly yet. It was also possible that it was just a coincidence.

"Umm…"

Liana concentrated her mind while looking at the shimmering emerald-colored sea.

-Flash!

I could see hundreds of bolts of lightning streaking across the sky and striking the sea.

The flashes of lightning hitting the distant sea.

And then.

-Rumble!

With a time lag, the thunderous sound that seemed to tear our ears reached us.

In a clear sky, she could strike hundreds of bolts of lightning just by concentrating for a moment.

Liana's power was undoubtedly incredible, bordering on catastrophic.

"That's not it."

“…I know."

At my words, Liana nodded her head with a nervous expression.

It was amazing, but what she needed to do now was not summoning lightning but changing the weather.

"It's a strange feeling… I feel like I can do something, but at the same time, I feel like I can't."

Even the origin and function of their powers were unknown to the users themselves.

So, Liana was in a state where she felt like she could do it, but couldn't grasp it at all.

Lucinil, being an Archmage, knew nothing about supernatural powers and could only tilt her head.

-Flash! Flash! Flash!

In the end, Liana spent a great deal of time striking the sea with lightning.

She seemed to want to summon something other than lightning, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't show any sign of manifesting anything other than lightning.

-Rumble!

About twenty minutes passed like that.

"By the way, Archdemon."

"Yes, my Lord."

"Although lightning falling on the sea surface isn't a big problem… what if a mermaid pops up out of curiosity and gets struck by lightning?"

"Th-That could happen?"

"…!"

There's always a possibility, however slim.

Although lightning falling into the sea doesn't kill fish, a wandering mermaid might stick her head out and get electrocuted.

In the end, the three of us, including Liana, sat down on the beach.

"Was it just… a delusion?"

Liana began to seriously wonder if she was a delusional person who believed she could cause weather changes.

Lucinil, of course, was at a loss.

"But when you were able to summon lightning… it was the same."

"Ah… yeah."

Liana became able to summon lightning amidst her father's death.

And if Liana had truly awakened a new power, it would also be a new power triggered by a certain emotional state.

"So, if you can use the new power in that kind of emotional state…"

"Does that mean I need to be in a similar emotional state?"

It wasn't Liana who continued my words, but Lucinil.

"If supernatural powers respond to emotions, and this time you can… cause weather changes, then all you have to do is be in a similar state to when that happened, right?"

Lucinil said, smiling innocently.

"Let's try to get into that feeling."

However.

It was obvious that she was in a very bad mental state at the time.

Isn't it terribly painful to have to fall into such a state artificially?

Liana's complexion turned ashen at Lucinil's suggestion.

It was obvious that her current mental state wasn't great, but she had to intentionally put herself in that state.

She must have been feeling depressed, or something quite similar.

If she unknowingly caused a weather change in that situation, she would have to deliberately dwell on her depression.

And, to plunge Liana into the depths of despair.

Upon reflection, it's an incredibly easy task.

Liana struggled with a stiff expression, unable to do anything, groaning for about five minutes.

"Hey."

“…Hmm?"

"Help me?"

At my unexpected words, Liana tilted her head.

"Help with… what?"

"Never mind the details, just help me?"

Liana seemed to have no idea what I was talking about.

"If I can help… that'd be… nice."

"Um, okay."

I grabbed Liana's shoulder and looked straight into her eyes.

"What I'm about to say isn't sincere. I'm just trying to help you, so don't misunderstand and listen. Got it?"

"Wh-? No, what are you trying to say…"

"It's all your fault."

Liana shattered.

CHAPTER 512

Liana sat hunched on the beach, her head bowed and silent.

Rumble -

"It doesn't seem like a coincidence, does it?"

“…No, it doesn't."

Dark storm clouds had gathered in the sky that had been crystal clear just moments ago, and thunder echoed from within the clouds.

If there was anyone who could kill Liana with words in Edina right now, it would be me.

It's all your fault.

At that single sentence, Liana stared vacantly at the sand on the beach with empty eyes.

I didn't mean it.

Liana wanted to find out for herself if her extreme emotional state could really cause weather changes, and I had said that without meaning it.

But that figure from behind…

She had been thinking that all along, hadn't she?

It's even more painful to see.

After staring at the sand for a while, Liana lifted her head to gaze at the gloomy sky above.

There was no denying the effects.

How much time had passed?

Liana, with her lifeless eyes, rose and approached me.

"A little more."

“…Huh?"

"Say something more to me."

No.

I understand the sentiment, but!

“…You two are really twisted."

Lucinil looked at Liana and me with lifeless eyes, a disgusted expression on her face.

“…Will it be okay?"

If she asked for it, I could do it, but wouldn't it end up completely trampling on Liana's already half-dead spirit?

It feels like she could crumble with just a touch.

"It's not okay. That's why I want you to say more."

She wanted me to beat her harder, knowing the effects.

Is this really okay?

Wouldn't Liana end up strangling herself with her own hands?

Even though her mental state was already unstable, tearing her apart with words for the sake of ability awakening… I had already done it, but was doing it more really alright?

“…Fine."

In the end, Liana had requested it herself.

In the end, hearing some kind of reproach from me might be a process for Liana to feel relieved.

Rather than not hearing anything, perhaps her heart could be at ease after being scolded.

I don't know for sure, but Liana might need my criticism apart from her ability awakening.

Because she had been scolded, she had paid the price.

Though she might not think that way, there was a small chance that Liana's heart could be eased by it.

I sat Liana down on the sandy beach and took a seat next to her.

And then, I spoke of the terrible things that had happened.

"To be honest, it's not all your fault."

Once I decided to do it, I wouldn't hold back.

"Because of various events, it ended up like this, didn't it?"

"…"

"Well, many people died… Olivia suffered a lot, too. I almost suffocated as well…"

"…"

"In the end, I had to kill Ellen, or it became a situation where I had to kill her…"

"…"

"So, for the past few days, I've been purposely having nightmares where Ellen kills me, to make it easier to be killed later."

"…"

"So, all these things…"

"…”

"It's not like it's all your fault that it turned out this way, right?"

Liana's lips twisted.

In the end, Liana's body trembled as she burst into tears.

"I'm… I'm sorry… I'm sorry… I'm sorry, Reinhardt…”

Even though she knew I was doing this on purpose, Liana had no choice but to be tormented by my words.

"I… I… I messed up… All of it, everything… It's because of me…”

I placed my hand on the trembling, sobbing Liana's shoulder, whispering in her ear.

"You said it's all your fault, but you never said you did anything right, did you?"

Never.

"Then why are you crying?"

"Heu… Euh… Euk! Euk…! Euhuk!"

There was no intention to take it lightly.

Soon, the rain began to fall.

-Rumble

The rain quickly turned into a storm.

-Swoosh!

A fierce storm raged, accompanied by violent winds.

The waves leaped ferociously, and within the dark clouds, lightning danced

incessantly, scattering sharp thunder on the ground.

It was clear by now.

Liana had indeed awakened the ability to control the weather.

Crying brings rain.

I stood motionless on the beach, facing the raging sea and the pouring downpour.

"You know that Valier doesn't really think that way."

"Ah, I know… I know… I know. I know, but… Euk… Euhuk…"

"Sigh. You should be gentler. She's completely broken."

Lucinil took Liana under a palm tree and tried to console her somehow, patting her back.

I was aware that I had spoken too harshly.

But perhaps Liana needed that.

Liana had never paid the price for her mistakes. And she couldn't take responsibility for anything that happened because of her mistakes.

So, even a little bit.

Even if it's scolding or criticism.

Wouldn't it be better to hear such words in order to pay some kind of price?

It wouldn't be comforting, but wouldn't there be some meaning to being criticized by me, the person involved?

The storm raged, and lightning roiled.

The rough sound of the wind on my skin, and the raindrops hitting my face with it, were fierce.

Weather changes.

Is this it?

Is this all?

I sit under a palm tree and stand in front of Liana, who is being comforted by Lucinil.

"Archdemon. Stop…”

Seeing my expression, Lucinil shook her head as if she read some determination.

But I have no intention of stopping.

"Liana."

“…Yes."

Liana lifts her head with difficulty and looks at me.

"Stand up."

"Stop it. You've checked, right? What are you trying to do more here? Huh?"

As if telling her to stop, Lucinil held onto Liana's collar as she tried to stand up at my command and shook her head.

The ability to change the weather has been confirmed.

Liana's ability has indeed evolved.

Liana's expression, trying to hold back her tears, was miserable and pitiful.

"What can you do with this?"

"…”

"Draw out more."

I point to the seashore.

"What will change with this bit of rain and wind?"

Can you kill monsters with rain?

Can you kill monsters with wind?

Lightning was an original power.

"More."

"…"

"Show me something more useful."

"…"

"If you want to take responsibility for what you've done, you'll have to show me something more useful than this."

"…"

"Do you think this is enough?"

"…No."

Liana shakes her head with a pitiful expression.

I don't know whether this is her true intention or not.

Liana has awakened a new ability, and it's certainly not an ordinary one.

But Liana has found new usefulness within herself and has reported it to me.

Then, something more.

Something more substantial, more practical, and more useful.

Something more destructive.

There had to be something like that.

I had said things I didn't mean just to provoke Liana.

But not anymore.

"Show me. If it's not there, then bring it forth. Create a power that doesn't exist and reveal it."

I was sincere.

"If you're going to take responsibility for even a speck of what you've done, don't you need to show me something more? Am I wrong?"

"Valier! Are you serious?"

Unable to hold back any longer, Lucinil grabs my sleeve.

"What?"

"…"

Lucinil, who had met my gaze, froze and couldn't say anything else to me.

"Am I wrong? Answer me."

"…Yes. You're right."

One can't kill monsters with just a storm.

So something more, something larger.

Something more devastating.

"If you know, then do it."

Can one take responsibility for their sins?

I don't know.

But Liana and I had decided to do something while we were alive.

For that, we needed power.

If hope becomes power, then we must find hope.

If anger becomes power, then we must give ourselves to anger.

If despair becomes power.

Then we must consume despair.

Upon my fierce command, Liana stared blankly at the seashore with lifeless eyes.

I didn't know if my command had drawn forth her power or if her despair and depression had fueled it.

-Rumble!

From a distance, I could see a massive waterspout rising, sucking up seawater.

Lucinil stood with her mouth agape, staring at the disaster that went beyond the overwhelming weather phenomenon.

We didn't settle for just a storm. Digging deeper into that power, we discovered that there was something like this.

Power enough to cause a disaster beyond a storm.

Liana must be the ultimate supernatural.

This should be enough.

Though she'd need to become more familiar with this power to use it in real situations.

But then.

You know what?

"That… after all the nonsense so far, I know it's not the time to say this…”

“…Hmm?"

When I stopped commanding and my tone returned to normal, Liana seemed flustered.

No.

It's great that we somehow managed to bring out the ability.

-Rumble!

The rough storm caused by the giant waterspout could be felt on our skin.

"Can you… get rid of that?"

I hadn't thought about how to get rid of it, only how to bring it out.

Liana and I locked eyes.

"…”

"…”

It was obvious that I had no countermeasures, and Liana seemed to have none either.

No matter how uninhabited this island was.

What would happen if that tornado reached the populated areas?

In the end, our last card.

I had no choice but to turn to the great mage, Lucinil.

"Um, Lord. Can't you do something with magic?"

“…Do you think I'd know magic to dismantle a naturally occurring tornado? And even if I knew magic to summon a tornado, I couldn't create one of that scale even if I tried."

Lucinil was in the same boat, with no countermeasures.

We had no choice but to return to the basic discussion.

This was a weather phenomenon created in response to Liana's gloomy state of mind.

That meant if Liana's mental state recovered, not only the storm but also the waterspout would disappear.

"You know that everything I've said so far was just talk, right?"

"…"

At my words, Liana's face contorted, and she began to cry once again.

There it was.

The scene of her crying, unable to cry while being scolded by her parents, only to have the tears explode in sorrow when comforted.

"Ugh… uh-huh… sob!"

"Oh dear, go on, cry. I'm sorry."

As I started to vigorously pat Liana's back, the soaked Lucinil stared at me with a startled expression.

"Valier, you really… you're really a piece of trash."

"…"

Anyway, Lucinil and I did our best to comfort Liana.

Thankfully, her dragon-like outburst subsided quickly.

The torrential rain, however, continued to pour.

Since there was still quite a bit of time before our departure, Liana, Lucinil, and I were able to devote some more time to our training on the uninhabited island.

Of course, we didn't eat or sleep on the island. There was no need to do so since we were training with an Archmage capable of mass teleportation.

"You should go home and sleep tonight."

“…Home?"

"Go to where your mother is and sleep. Be back here by noon tomorrow."

I gave these instructions to Liana, who wore a gloomy expression. Her face remained dark, but she nodded reluctantly as if questioning the necessity of this.

"Go hold your mom's hand and sleep. Just because the power comes out when you're mentally down doesn't mean you always have to be miserable, right?"

“…Are you doing this on purpose?"

"How did you know?"

As I chuckled, Liana's face seemed on the verge of tears again.

Is she moved by the usual teasing?

"Fine, I'll go home and hold my mom's hand to sleep, even if I have to be sad and depressed. Damn it."

With a bitter smile, as if joking, Liana left for the castle.

"Ah, power that only comes out when you're sad. Being a supernatural is pretty complicated."

"Still, it's better than not having any power at all."

“…True."

Lucinil watched Liana's retreating figure with a pitiful gaze.

That night.

"Liana?"

"Yeah."

Since I hadn't called for Airi today, only Harriet and I were in the bedroom.

"Controlling weather phenomena… that's amazing."

Harriet, sitting on the bed, marveled while jotting down notes in her research journal.

She could even summon tornadoes.

But that wasn't the end of it; Liana's ability definitely had more potential.

Since she could make the sky cloudy, she should also be able to make it clear, make it snow, and even cause hail.

Going further, could she not cause natural disasters like earthquakes as well?

The extent of Liana's supernatural potential was uncertain.

Therefore, I wanted to focus on developing Liana's abilities before our departure.

"But Liana's power only manifests when she's feeling down?"

"Yeah, that's why I had to say harsh things to her, and it made me feel miserable as well."

"Harsh things?"

"You know… that incident this time…"

"Ah…"

Without going into details, Harriet seemed to understand what I meant and nodded her head with a weary expression.

It was hard for me to say such things, for Liana to hear them, and for Lucinil to witness the maddening scene.

We were all doing things we couldn't stand.

"It must have been tough… for both you and Liana."

The thought of having to do this again tomorrow was dreadful.

Harriet was repeatedly writing something in her research journal, pausing to contemplate, and then continuing to write.

"Um… But if you think about it, do we really have to do it that way?"

As if she came up with an idea, Harriet looked at me.

"Do we really have to… I mean, say such hurtful things?"

"Yeah, do we really have to do that?"

"Well, her power seems to emerge when she's depressed, so there was no other choice…"

"No, if being depressed is a condition, you don't have to… say things you don't even want to say."

"Then how do we make her feel depressed?"

The fact that we were seriously discussing how to make a friend feel depressed in itself was bizarre and dreadful.

"Wouldn't drugs be enough?"

"…What?"

What is she talking about?

"Wouldn't it be enough to use a drug that lowers mood? It's better than saying things that hurt…"

"But… wouldn't that be bad if we use drugs?"

Upon hearing the word "drug," I was initially shocked, making Harriet's words seem

sinister.

"As long as there are no side effects."

“…Really?"

"A depressant, excluding addictive properties or such aspects. If we actually try to create it, it wouldn't be impossible."

Come to think of it, Christina was in charge of creating Moonshine, the essence of alchemy, but Harriet also played a role in the manufacturing of Power Cartridges and Moonshine.

That's why Harriet must have considerable knowledge of alchemy.

Harriet quickly wrote something in her research journal, tore out a page, and handed it to me.

"Show this to the Lord of Wednesday. She should roughly understand what it is. Mix it as written and give it to her."

"But… it's still a drug… Are you sure it's okay?"

“…Don't you trust me?"

"Well, that's not the issue…”

As soon as the word "drug" came up, I was scared, and Harriet looked at me with a sly gaze.

Would it be better to use a drug to create such a state instead of verbally assaulting her to immerse her in depression? Once the drug wears off, her mood should return to normal.

If there are no side effects, as Harriet says, what Liana needs might actually be something like this.

No.

But it's absurd to receive a prescription for a depressant, not an antidepressant.

Is this even right?

"All drugs are like this, but remember that long-term use is forbidden. Just keep that in mind."

After saying that, Harriet returned her gaze to her research journal.

It's not right to hurt her with words to bring out her power.

In the end, it only torments each other.

So, use drugs instead.

That was Harriet's prescription.

CHAPTER 513

Rumors spread throughout the allied forces that the hero, Ellen Artorius, had awakened another power.

Everyone who witnessed the vanguard sweeping away the monsters as the main force advanced could not help but be in awe.

A massive wave of flames pouring from the hero's Sun Cloak swept away the monsters.

Inferior monsters turned to ash within the wave of fire, while those that withstood the flames met their demise by the void sword that could sever anything.

Ellen was the very embodiment of the judgment of the sun and the moon, sweeping away the waves of monsters at the forefront.

However, the hateful flames pouring from the Sun Mantle did not discriminate against friend or foe.

Thus, no one could intervene in the middle of the battlefield where Ellen single-handedly swept away the enemies.

The majority of the allied forces were encouraged by the fact that the hero had grown stronger.

However, "majority" implies that not everyone felt the same way.

While everyone admired the hero's prowess, those who knew Ellen from the Temple felt uneasy about Ellen Artorius's appearance.

Something was off about Ellen.

She had always been quiet, but now she spoke even less.

Her pupils seemed unfocused and hazy, and she occasionally muttered strange nonsense while clutching her head.

After the march, they set up camp again.

Emperor Bertus and the Archbishops of the Five Great Religious Orders came to inspect the camp.

Although the visit was ostensibly to boost the morale of the allied forces and the Holy Knights, the Emperor had a hidden agenda.

Having received a report from Saviolin Turner that Ellen Artorius's condition was unusual, he came to check on her.

Inside the camp, Ellen Artorius's tent.

"Ellen."

“…Yes."

Emperor Bertus could not help but feel uneasy upon seeing Ellen's condition.

Seated across from her, he stared at Ellen, who was gazing into the void with her hazy eyes.

Saviolin Turner stood guard beside Bertus.

Ellen had awakened another power she hadn't been able to use before.

However, aside from growing stronger, it seemed Ellen Artorius faced a serious issue.

"You seem to be in pain somewhere."

"…”

Everyone who knew Ellen asked her about her condition.

Asking if she was in pain or if she was alright.

But each time, Ellen shook her head.

She would only say she was tired, as she glanced around with her blurry eyes, as if trying to confirm what was around her.

Ellen checked the figures of Emperor Bertus and Saviolin Turner standing beside him.

"A while ago… I met Reinhardt."

Ellen still maintained her sense of self.

Emperor Bertus and Saviolin Turner knew the truth about the Gate incident.

So, Ellen decided it was okay to tell them what she had been through.

Reinhardt was dying, and she took on his burden.

Upon briefly explaining the situation, Bertus and Turner could only be shocked.

It was a phenomenon caused by too many deaths. It had struck Reinhardt, and Ellen had inherited it.

Ellen's mental state couldn't be sound under such circumstances.

"I had no choice… I had to do it. That's what I think."

"…"

"…"

Ellen mumbled absentmindedly, almost out of her wits, that she had to save Reinhardt.

Both Bertus and Turner couldn't deny it was a reckless act.

However, they also understood Ellen's desire to save Reinhardt in that situation.

"My ego will probably fade away gradually. But, I won't harm anyone… surely."

Even if her ego vanished, bearing hatred for the Demon King, she wouldn't harm humans. She would become a puppet with only hatred for the Demon King remaining.

Ellen secretly met with Reinhardt not to tell Berthold and Turner about it, but for a different reason.

Now that she had unleashed the true power of Lapelt, Ellen had grown stronger.

"So, when the Gate Incident is completely over… please kill me…"

After the Gate Incident ended, it was certain that Ellen, having lost her ego, would try to kill the Demon King.

"Before I try to kill Reinhardt…"

So, she asked them to kill her once her purpose was fulfilled.

Ellen pleaded with Turner and Berthold.

"What is this?"

"…"

-Rumble!

Following the recipe Harriet provided, Lucinil concocted an alchemical potion.

After consuming it, Liana successively summoned three tornadoes on the seashore.

They didn't know if it was right or not, but nothing seemed better for drawing out her abilities.

Of course.

"…"

It was extremely painful to see Liana's complexion turned pale and lifeless.

"Let's use it only when absolutely necessary."

"I suppose so…"

As Lucinil spoke, Liana slowly nodded in agreement.

The drug was effective but excessively dangerous.

Though I no longer needed to provoke Liana to activate her powers.

Somehow.

Liana's appearance seemed painfully exhausted.

In some ways, it looked as if she was being properly punished.

Anyway, one thing was certain.

Liana, having taken the depression-inducing drug, was invincible.

The drug Liana took had definite effects.

Could it be called a drug, even?

Not a mood-enhancing drug, but a mood-depressing one.

Could a drug with the opposite effect still be called a drug?

No, perhaps it's more fitting to call it a drug because it has effects suitable for the very name itself.

Though there were no side effects, the drug's effectiveness was not much different from side effects, so it couldn't be used frequently.

The more it was used, the more the user would suffer from the drug's effects.

That's why Harriet warned against overusing it.

Liana focused on Harriet's words, not about avoiding overuse, but that there would be no side effects aside from the drug's effects themselves.

Even without my supervision, Liana was practicing on a deserted island with Lucinil,

trying to explore the depths of her abilities.

It was good that her ability development accelerated, but was it genuinely a good thing?

Liana was tormenting herself.

The selection process for Olivia and the elite Vampires, as well as war preparations, progressed smoothly.

The moment we stepped in, the army's march would quicken, and the speed of suppressing the Gate Incident would also increase.

Meanwhile, separate from the war preparations, other tasks were progressing one by one.

Fighting Ellen in my dreams continued on alternate days.

Still, it wasn't going well.

Fighting without a proper mindset to harm Ellen put me at a disadvantage.

Moreover, the Void Sword Lament would cleave everything it touched, excluding divine relics.

Although I had become a master class, my overall specs were still insufficient, and I was not properly prepared for battle.

I had to experience defeat ending in my death, a hundred out of a hundred times.

The pain experienced in a dream at the moment of death was nothing more than a mere bonus.

"Is it already finished?"

"Yeah. It wasn't that difficult."

I stood with my mouth agape, looking at the white obelisk that had replaced the central fountain in Lazak's square.

Passersby would tilt their heads in confusion at the sight of the suddenly erected obelisk, but they had no idea what it really was.

Beside me were Harriet and Airi.

"Your abilities as a scribe are truly astonishing, the more I learn about them."

"Is, is that so……”

Unaccustomed to compliments, Harriet blushed at Airi's words.

The Dream Obelisk.

Not only had Harriet succeeded in deciphering dream magic, but she had also quickly managed to turn it into an artifact.

Somehow, she had spent the past few days scribbling in her research notes, and it seemed that she was working to create this.

"First, we'll test it out, and if it seems effective, we'll consider installing more in other areas."

"Sounds good."

Although getting a good night's sleep might not seem particularly significant during this time, I believed that the Dream Obelisk, which could fend off terrible nightmares, would undoubtedly be helpful to people.

Technically speaking, dream interference magic wasn't magic but a unique ability possessed only by succubi.

Harriet's ability to reinterpret that as magic and turn it into an artifact had long surpassed the abilities of most Archmages.

Harriet's capacity had grown incomparably since her first year, which made such a feat possible.

From a genius with the greatest magical talent in history, she had grown enough to

fully utilize her abilities.

Ironically, it was thanks to Charlotte that Harriet could develop artifacts so rapidly.

When Harriet had to assist me and act as a secretary, she had no time for her personal pursuits.

However, since Charlotte efficiently handled her duties without needing to act as a secretary, Harriet could fully devote her time to her desired projects.

But still, it felt strange.

It was a good thing that Harriet could devote all her time to her research.

It was also a good thing that Charlotte had taken over my duties and was performing them even better than me.

But the fact that I had unknowingly been stealing Harriet's time all along became too apparent, and it left me feeling a bit…

How should I put it?

A sense of self-reproach, perhaps.

"…"

"What's wrong?"

That night, as I sat on the bed after preparing for sleep, Harriet tilted her head, noticing my silence.

“…What?"

"Are you angry?"

"No? Not at all."

“…You look upset."

I hadn't thought I'd shown any signs, and there was no reason to be angry. Strictly

speaking, I should have been happy that my proposal had been implemented so quickly, not upset.

In response to my denial, Harriet stared at me intently.

Come to think of it.

Ever since I had usurped Edina's government, I had spent the most time with Harriet.

So, due to the long time we spent together, Harriet was the one most sensitive to my mood swings.

In other words, I couldn't fool Harriet, even if I could fool anyone else.

In the end, I had no choice but to sigh under her gaze.

"It's just… I've been thinking that maybe I've taken up too much of your time."

"My time……?"

"Come to think of it, with just this level of concentration, you could create something like this. If I had been able to handle state affairs alone, you could have done something else. Something more constructive and progressive… What should I say? You could have done something that only you can do."

Harriet was an overly talented individual to simply serve as my secretary.

However, everyone else around me was busy with their own responsibilities. Although Harriet reluctantly took on the role of my secretary, it was undeniable that she was an irreplaceable, exceptional talent.

If Harriet hadn't been my secretary and had focused on her research instead, she might have accomplished even greater things that only she could do.

If only I had been a little more capable.

Now that Charlotte, who undoubtedly had better qualifications for governance than me, had taken over the administration, I couldn't help but think about what I could have achieved but didn't in the time that had already passed.

"Wait… Was that it?"

"It's a bit of a foolish concern, but I can't help but think about it."

As I sighed, Harriet smiled wryly.

"Well… Hmm…"

Harriet sat huddled on the bed, lost in thought.

"I'm not sure what I could have done if I had taken on a different role… Honestly, I don't know. I was busy too, just like you."

"…"

"Still, I enjoyed it."

Harriet said this as she looked at me.

"I enjoyed being close to you."

"…Is that so?"

Her words left me speechless.

I couldn't bring myself to look directly at Harriet's face.

"Even if I might have been able to do something else, the things we accomplished together aren't erased. Even if Charlotte could do what we did faster and better, we can't say that what we managed to do was worthless."

"…You're right."

Yes, that's true.

At some point, age seemed to lose its significance.

At some point, I had been receiving too much help from those around me, and in some ways, others were wiser than me.

Not to mention saying pleasant things.

Pleasant words might not mean anything, but people need such things.

Harriet had always been close to me, and she still is.

That's why Harriet said she enjoyed it.

Leaving aside practical efficiency and other possibilities.

I also truly enjoyed it.

At some point, Harriet had become devoted to me.

She really tried to give me everything.

After finishing her words, Harriet returned to writing in her research journal.

Harriet, who no longer needed to act as my secretary, was still busy.

She continued to search for things to do.

"Still, take it easy. Is there more work left?"

"I think I should keep an eye on the obelisk. There's a lot of other work."

"Other work?"

"I'm learning about soul-subduing techniques from the Lord of Wednesday."

Soul-subduing techniques.

In the midst of all this, she was suddenly learning about soul-subduing techniques from Lucinil? At my puzzled expression, Harriet looked at me with a sad smile.

"Ellen, we have to find a way to bring her back."

"Ah…"

Her words left me feeling as if I was suffocating.

"I had no time, so I had no choice but to do it this way. There might have been another method."

"…"

"I won't forget that Ellen took on everything."

Harriet continues to write in her research journal.

"Ellen is also my friend, you know."

It wasn't Antirianus who had suggested to Ellen that she should shoulder everything; it was Harriet.

Ellen is also a friend to Harriet.

I had forgotten this obvious fact for far too long.

After writing in her research journal for quite some time, Harriet suddenly looks at me.

"So, don't try to thank me."

"Uh…?"

"Because then, I'd feel hurt."

At Harriet's words, I was left speechless, unable to respond.

CHAPTER 514

Ellen pleaded with Turner and Bertus to kill her after the resolution of the Gate Incident.

"There's no way we can do that."

"There must be another way, Ellen."

Naturally, neither Turner nor Bertus had any intention of fulfilling such a request from Ellen.

It wasn't because Ellen was humanity's hope, or because she needed to remain as a symbol of hope for the rebuilding of humanity after the Gate Incident.

It was because they didn't believe Ellen had to die in such a manner.

Bertus promised to find a solution by any means necessary, whether by gathering the combined forces of the Five Great Religious Orders to perform a purification ritual or something else.

He would do whatever it took to restore Ellen to her original state.

Bertus immediately arranged a meeting with the Popes of the Five Great Religious Orders, who were currently inspecting the garrison.

"You're saying the hero has been possessed by spirits?"

"We don't know the exact reason, but it's confirmed that these spirits are devouring the hero's ego. We must gather all the priests immediately and perform a purification ritual."

Bertus didn't mention that Ellen had willingly accepted these spirits. There was no need to bring up such details.

Within this most powerful human army, the majority were priests and holy knights from the Holy Order of the Five Great Religious Orders.

By gathering their collective strength, they aimed to purify the resentful spirits lingering in Ellen's body and soul.

Regardless of whether it was possible, they had to try.

"Is that really necessary?"

“…What did you just say?"

Bertus narrowed his eyes at the words of the Pope of the Als Order.

"If those spirits are too much for even the hero to handle, and her ego ultimately vanishes, wouldn't that mean she would be reborn as an even more suitable hero?"

This time, it was the Pope of the Tu’an Order who spoke.

The one who served the Goddes of Purity was actually endorsing the hero being consumed by the impure spirits.

"I've heard the hero has awakened a new power and has become even stronger than before. If that's the case, it's due to the added strength of those spirits within the hero. If the hero becomes even stronger, what could be better for humanity?"

At the Als Pope's remark, Bertus clenched his teeth.

The relics of the Tu’an and Als Orders had chosen the Demon King.

Thus, the positions of the two orders were much worse off compared to the other orders.

It was only natural for the masses to shun the two orders, while their priests and holy knights had to endure contempt even in this garrison.

The Popes of the Tu’an and Als Orders actually desired the Demon King's death the most.

Only once the Demon King was dead and gone would it be possible for them to dream of rebuilding their orders.

Although it was true that the emerging religion, the Hero Religion, received the most

support, the Gods of the two relics that chose the hero, the Mencis and Shal'am Orders, also had a significant following among the people.

The Order of Riter, the God of Courage, was uninvolved with both the Demon King and the hero, so they at least didn't suffer any damage.

As the Demon King gained more power, the Riter and Mencis Orders received more support.

The Popes of the Als and Tu'an Orders, who needed the Demon King to die in order to rebuild their orders, were ironically hoping for the death of the very Demon King chosen by their Gods.

Therefore, they took the position that it would be better for the hero, Ellen Artorius, to become an empty shell fueled by hatred for the Demon King, regardless of the circumstances.

Just as the popes of the Tu'an and Als Orders wished for the death of the Demon King, so did the popes of the other three Orders.

When the Demon King dies, and the hero loses her symbolic power after fulfilling her role, only then will the façade of the Hero Religion, a hollow religion, disappear.

Only then can the Five Great Religious Orders regain control of the continent's faith.

The popes of the Five Great Religious Orders wished for the death of the Demon King.

"Do you all not know what the Demon King intended?"

Above all, they were among the very few who knew the truth behind the Gate Incident.

The popes of the Five Great Religious Orders were there when they interrogated the Demon King Reinhardt.

Therefore, they knew that the Hero Ellen Artorius was an existence that could not truly kill the Demon King.

At that, the pope of the Riter Order stared at Bertus.

"Was it not the Imperial Family who caused the Gate Incident by refusing to trust the Demon King?"

"…"

"Now that you know the Demon King is a benevolent being, do you feel a sense of duty to prevent any more sorrowful events from befalling the Demon King and the Hero?"

Bertus, grinding his teeth, could not say a word.

The words of the Riter Order's pope were all horrifyingly true.

"Your Majesty, there is no meaning in regretting what has already happened."

"Whether the Demon King is good or evil is now irrelevant."

"Before the Gate Incident, if we had believed it about two years ago, many things would have been different."

"It is too late to believe the Demon King's words now, and even if we were to show him compassion, nothing would change."

"Since the Gate Incident, the concepts of good and evil have become meaningless, and the only justice is survival. It has been this way for a long time."

"What meaning can good and evil have in a fight for survival?"

"The Demon King must die."

"Not because it is the right thing to do, but because it is necessary for the survival of humanity, the Empire, and the Five Great Religious Orders."

Bertus could not say a word in response to the Riter Order's pope.

Against those heart-wrenching truths, Bertus could not muster a single word of rebuttal.

He should have believed sooner if he wanted to believe.

Nothing would change even if he believed in the Demon King now.

Because everything he said was true, Bertus had no choice but to remain silent in his miserable state of mind.

"Everyone in this room knows that the Hero had a very close relationship with the Demon King and that she knows the truth of everything. That she cannot truly harm the Demon King."

Those in this room knew the things that most people did not.

Those who knew the truth knew that the Hero was not one who could properly embody the faith of the people.

They knew that she was an existence incapable of fulfilling the hope of defeating the Demon King.

However, the situation had changed.

The Hero's self, who could not hate the Demon King, would disappear, and when the spirits consumed the Hero, she would be able to do what she truly had to do.

Regardless of whether it was possible, the popes had no reason whatsoever to help purify the spirits dwelling within Ellen's soul.

"Isn't that why the situation has turned out like this, which can only be a good thing for humanity?"

Bertus looked at the five popes, including Turners.

No one seemed willing to help.

The Holy Knights Order ultimately acted upon the orders of their leader, Eleion Bolton, and the five Popes of the Orders.

And was this situation truly terrible for humanity?

Bertus couldn't possibly refute that claim.

And he, himself, was no different than the instigator of all this, for he failed to trust

Reinhardt when he should have.

During Reinhardt's interrogation, the Popes were essentially nothing more than lackeys.

The claim that the real responsibility lay with the Gardias Imperial Family wasn't a provocation but a simple fact.

Thus, Bertus knew all too well that he had no right to condemn them.

In a battle for survival, one couldn't differentiate between good and evil.

The Popes were no longer followers of their deity.

Those who fought solely for the survival of their authority and the church's existence were not worthy of being called Popes.

However, in a struggle for survival, it was not humanity's existence and restoration at stake, but the Hero and the Demon King.

To pity the two of them, regardless of humanity's existence and hope, was to prevent their predetermined future and seek the impossible coexistence with the Demon King.

Did he truly deserve to be called humanity's Emperor?

The Popes were not Popes.

And the Emperor was not an Emperor either.

After the meeting concluded, the Popes began inspecting the garrison once more to encourage the Holy Knights.

Bertus sat on one of the many wooden crates scattered around the hilltop command post, gazing down at the garrison.

"Your Majesty…”

"…"

Savolin Turner looked at Bertus with concern.

Bertus remained silent, staring at the garrison with a stern expression.

The Popes were not wrong.

The root of all problems was complex, so complex that no one could say who was truly responsible.

However, it was undeniable that the Gardias Imperial Family held a significant portion of the blame.

Since he hadn't believed when he should have, The Pope of the Riter Order said it was now pointless to believe.

Bertus knew better than anyone that this was not a false claim.

For humanity, it was better for the Demon King to die.

And if he must die, it was better for him to die at the hands of the Hero.

From the Demon King's death, people would find hope, and regardless of how bleak reality was, they would believe that only prosperity lay ahead for humanity since the last Demon King had perished.

Hope and despair are ludicrous concepts.

Both are useless when it comes to actually saving or killing people.

However, despair does kill people, while hope saves them.

For that hope, two people alone—

Reinhardt and Ellen Artorius.

Would it be acceptable for them to be engulfed in abject despair?

For humanity's existence and restoration, was it truly right for these two to bear the

despair of all others?

One would cease to exist, and the other would lose their life.

Both were idols.

The idol of hope, the Hero.

The idol of despair, the Demon King.

Sacrificing the two idols to anesthetize people with false hope and scheming the restoration of humanity and the Church was the right decision for an Emperor.

There was no one else around.

Having stationed all personnel away from the command post and the Popes having left, only Turner and Bertus remained.

"Lady Turner."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"I thought I had the qualities of an Emperor."

"…"

"Even if I couldn't be the greatest Emperor in history, I thought there would be no one better in my time."

Bertus chuckled softly.

"When Charlotte returned alive, I had quite a few scenarios in my head."

"Scenarios…?"

"Scenarios in which I could become the emperor."

Bertus gazed at the distant sky.

The clear blue sky seemed ignorant of the world's tragedies.

Despite the sounds of meals being prepared and the pounding of the military camp on the ground.

Despite the unending funerals for the fallen soldiers.

The sky knew nothing of it.

"I thought of every possible situation: when my position would be better than Charlotte's, when it would be worse, or when it would be so insufficient that it couldn't be reversed. All of those thoughts were in my head."

Although Bertus had already become the emperor, he had been calculating numerous plans in his head before and in order to become the emperor.

"When Charlotte came back, I felt a great sense of crisis. Although an emperor isn't elected by the support of the crowd, it can't be ignored. The influence of a princess who was captured by the demon king and returned after enduring hardships was bound to be tremendous."

The returned Charlotte de Gardias was a very strong rival for Bertus.

"Even when she used some scheme to cling to the Temple, even the Royal class, I thought I might lose my position."

“…I see."

"But surprisingly,"

Bertus grinned.

"Ragan Artorius's younger sister is in the same class as me."

If Charlotte hadn't returned alive, Ellen would have been a name of little significance to Bertus.

However, because of Charlotte's existence, Bertus needed a symbol that could threaten Charlotte's political position.

It seemed that Saviolin Turner knew what Bertus was talking about.

"One of my various plans was to marry Ellen Artorius."

"I see…"

A marriage of strategy.

Moreover, if his partner was the hero's sister, it would certainly secure a strong political position.

"But, she looked at me as if I were a pebble rolling on the side of the road."

Not exactly disregarded.

But, not particularly interested either.

Ellen Artorius was that kind of person.

Indifferent to everyone equally.

"I didn't attach much importance to it, since it was a method needed only when the situation was unfavorable and I had no personal interest. It was just a political necessity."

"…"

"But at some point, she started hanging around with Reinhardt, who came from a beggar's background."

Temple, Royal Class 1st Year Room A.

Ellen began to stick with Reinhardt, who had no talent at all.

Ellen, who was indifferent to everyone, showed an unusual amount of interest in just one person.

At that time, Ellen didn't know who Reinhardt was.

Whether Reinhardt knew who Ellen was or not, Bertus couldn't know.

The hero's sister, who had no interest in anyone.

Reinhardt, a poor, incompetent beggar with a foul temper, but hiding a past as the demon king.

The two became close as if drawn to each other.

They became close even though there was no reason to do so.

"All the plans I had made became useless, and I had no occasion to use them. All the scenarios I had drawn disappeared. But anyway, I became the emperor."

In a completely unintended way.

The previous emperor had died from overwork, and the princess was unable to succeed to the throne.

Bertus didn't have a chance to try out his many scenarios to become the emperor, but he still became one.

"I think there's some kind of fate between the two of them."

They became each other's closest friends first.

Now, they had grown farthest apart.

They cherished each other, but they were in a position where they had to be hostile.

Bertus sensed a sense of fate in this sinister picture.

Each was a part of that fate, and each performed their own unique function, little by little.

Bertus quietly stared at the vast expanse of the garrison.

"The emperor must act according to what the head accepts, rather than what the heart accepts. That's how I think."

"…"

"Especially in times like these, it's even more so."

One must take the rational path, particularly during these difficult times when making an emotional choice would be foolish.

In a situation where good outcomes can't be guaranteed by merely taking the rational path, the result of making an emotional choice is far too obvious.

"I know that the words of the Popes, as dirty and filthy as vermin, are not wrong. I also know very well that I have no right to criticize them."

The choices of the Popes of the Holy Order may be cruel and malicious.

But one cannot deny that it's a rational choice in the current situation.

Bertus knows best that the greatest responsibility lies within the Gardias Imperial family.

Saviolin Turner silently watched the emperor's vulnerable appearance.

"What is… the best?"

"…"

The emperor's question was short but exceedingly difficult.

The best is simple.

Leaving Ellen Artorius, now devoid of weakness, to kill the Demon King would be the best course of action.

But that is only the best at this point in time; whether it is truly the best or not is unknowable.

"When I found out Reinhardt was the Demon King, the best thing at that time was not to trust him. There were too many lies, and if I had trusted the Demon King then, I would have been insane."

"…That's true."

"The best thing to accept rationally at that time was not to trust Reinhardt."

The best at that time turned out to be the worst now.

The best that could be accepted rationally at that time remains unchanged even now.

It was impossible to trust the Demon King.

So, they didn't trust him.

However, that choice brought about the worst phenomenon in the world.

The best choice resulted in the worst outcome, and many people are now responsible for something that wasn't their choice. That is the Gate Incident.

"Is it an exaggeration to think that if leaving Ellen alone now is the best, it may later become the worst?"

"…"

"It's an exaggeration."

Turner didn't answer, but Bertus smiled bitterly, as if he knew even without her saying it.

There had been a time when the best choice brought the worst outcome.

So it's merely an exaggeration to say that they won't choose the best now because it might bring the worst outcome later.

Bertus knows now.

The best at the moment can easily become the worst outcome later.

A choice is just a choice, and until time reveals the result of that choice, it's impossible to know whether it's the best or the worst.

There is neither the best nor the worst.

Only choices exist.

"I cannot leave those two like this."

Bertus could not just leave Ellen like this.

It's not because he believed that this would be the best in the future.

It's just that he wanted to make that choice, and that's why he chose it.

Qualities of an Emperor.

That's why Bertus now thinks he no longer has them.

CHAPTER 515

The Five Great Religious Orders had decided not to cooperate. Therefore, purifying the vengeful spirits that dwelled within Ellen's soul could not even be attempted, regardless of whether it was possible or not.

In that case, the only option left was magic.

Bertus summoned the Royal mage.

"It's impossible…" he said.

In the process of discussing the matter with the royal mage, Bertus's expression could not help but harden upon hearing the Archmage's opinions.

"Your Majesty, the spells dealing with souls are exceedingly rare."

Magic that manipulates souls.

From the beginning, it had been classified as a taboo, and thus, it had not been thoroughly researched.

Even the soul-absorbing spell that had been studied to improve the princess's condition was only a part of the magic dealing with souls.

"There are magices who have studied and understood soul-absorbing spells, but… the means to handle them are extremely limited."

After listening to the stories of the royal mage, Bertus could not help but feel disheartened.

Magic that deals with souls itself is extremely rare.

Those who have become Archmages can perform magic that deals with souls, based on their understanding of soul-absorbing spells. However, the number of vengeful spirits dwelling within Ellen is beyond estimation.

From the start, the spell that transferred the souls dwelling in the Demon King's body to Ellen's was nothing short of a miracle.

The royal mage's response was that only those who had spent an immeasurable amount of time studying magic, like the ancient Vampire Lords, were able to use such magic.

The royal mages were not significantly lacking in combat power and magical application compared to the Vampire Lords, as they gathered particularly outstanding individuals among humans.

However, the weight of the time they had lived was different.

There was a difference in the absolute amount of knowledge.

That is why a large-scale soul transfer spell, which was only possible for Vampire Lords, is impossible for the empire's power.

Even if they could do it, it is doubtful whether there is someone who can handle it.

The priests will not cooperate.

There is no solution in magic.

"…”

Was it a delusion to think that something could be done?

Trying to do something because it can't be left alone.

Despite being the emperor, is there really nothing he can do for those two?

Bertus just stared at the round table with a hardened expression.

Magic.

Divine power.

Are those really the only way?

Is there really no other way?

"If there is some ancient secret or mystery that we do not know about… But as for us, there is currently no way…"

"Ancient secret…?"

"Yes."

An ancient secret.

At the mention of that, something came to Bertus's mind.

Rune magic.

There was definitely such a thing as rune magic.

Bertus could recall that there was someone among his classmates who showed talent in rune magic.

No one knew what rune magic was.

Although it was learned at the temple due to talent, there was no teacher at the temple who could teach the major of Dettomorian.

Just as there were students of the temple serving in the military, there were also teachers serving in the military.

The royal class homeroom teachers were no exception.

It was primarily the teachers' responsibility to manage the students, though the commanders also had roles in it.

Royal class, second year.

Two years had passed, so it should have been the fourth year, but the temple's curriculum was on hold.

Magician Mustlang, who was in charge of the Royal Class's second-year students and currently serving in the military.

After Teacher Epinhauser, who was in charge of Class A, had sided with the Demon King and passed away, Teacher Mustlang was now in charge of all the second-year students in the Royal Class.

In front of Bertus, Teacher Mustlang stood upright.

At this moment, Bertus was not a student but an emperor. Therefore, Teacher Mustlang stood firmly before the emperor, answering his questions.

"Adding spiritual realm to sorcery…"

"Yes, Your Majesty. That's… that's correct."

Although it was a rather peculiar situation to have a student who was now an emperor, Mustlang stood rigidly, sweating nervously.

If one possessed talent in both sorcery and the spiritual realm, it suggested that Dettomorian might be able to accomplish what many great mages and clergy could not.

Of course, it was not guaranteed, but even the slightest possibility was something Bertus needed to grasp at in his current position.

B-8, Dettomorian.

"He's not at the garrison?"

"No, he's not!"

Non-combat majors also served in the military. Adelia, with her magic crafting talent, and Christina, with her alchemy talent, were examples of this.

Even Ranian Sesor, with his musical talent, served in this garrison to boost morale.

However, Dettomorian, who possessed talent in shamanism, was not in active service.

This meant he was remaining in the imperial capital.

Of course, not all students of the temple had the obligation or need to serve in this war. There was no need to forcibly drag along those who wouldn't help in the battle or support the fighters.

"He served during the initial deployment, and he was eager to do so… but due to other students and soldiers feeling uneasy…"

"They're feeling uneasy?"

According to Teacher Mustlang's explanation, Dettomorian had not been originally intended to remain in the capital, but had returned after serving for some time and being deemed necessary to stay behind.

"Yes… That's… well…"

Teacher Mustlang hesitantly began to explain the situation to his student and the highest authority, Bertus.

As the explanation continued, Bertus couldn't help but wear a grave expression.

Firstly, Dettomorian did not participate in battles. He did not possess talents that would aid in battle itself.

However, he would mutter incomprehensible words all day long and, once the garrison was established, he would lock himself inside his tent, refusing to come out.

Even more strangely, he would constantly request bizarre things.

He claimed to need live chickens, bones, and even asked for any available rats, whether field mice or house mice.

Hearing him muttering unintelligible words, someone peeked inside his tent only to find him bowing to a grotesque idol made of bones, lighting incense, and dancing bizarrely.

It was clear to anyone that this was ominous, and the soldiers could not help but feel uneasy about this seemingly heretical summoning ritual that he performed daily.

Rumors spread that one of the temple students was possessed by a demon.

"What on earth is he doing?"

"I've asked him several times as his homeroom teacher, and he says he doesn't know the precise effect… When I ask him to stop because it makes people uneasy, he insists that he can't sit idly by as this is all he can do… So… that's why…"

"…I see."

No one knew the specific meaning behind Dettomorian's muttered spells and rituals.

But he was clearly performing ominous rituals, making use of bizarre offerings.

The effects were unknown, but morale was definitely dropping.

And morale was a crucial issue within the army.

Of course, the scale of the army was so massive that a single Dettomorian couldn't have a significant impact on the overall morale, but it certainly had a continuous negative influence in certain areas.

Thus, after a meeting, the teachers at the temple garrison decided to send the Dettomorian back to the temple.

Bertus and Saviolin Turner couldn't help but feel uneasy as they listened to the explanation of Teacher Mustlang, who was sweating profusely.

"…Will it be alright, Lady Turner?"

Charlotte knew a fair bit about the Dettomorian since they were in the same class, but Bertus hardly knew what kind of creature he actually was.

It was clear that someone who followed the army and participated in bizarre, heretical rituals couldn't be in their right mind.

Regardless of whether all other possibilities were blocked, could they entrust the hope of humanity to a being whose identity and ritual were unknown?

Turner and Bertus both couldn't easily come to a conclusion.

Staggering!

"Ugh!"

"Ellen…? Are you alright?"

After finishing their meal in the garrison mess hall, Heinrich von Schwartz checked on Ellen, who suddenly clutched her head and bent over in pain.

"Ye-yes, I'm… I'm fine…"

As if to reassure him, Ellen raised one hand and tried to catch her breath, still bent over.

"You have to go out tomorrow, don't you? Will you be okay?"

"I'm fine…"

"No, you don't look fine at all."

Heinrich clicked his tongue as he saw Ellen's serious condition.

"I'll go instead of you for tomorrow's operation, so take some rest. Even you can't keep this up without dying."

"…"

Pyrokinesis user, Heinrich von Schwartz.

In the blink of an eye, Heinrich's abilities had grown powerful enough to be deployed in large-scale extermination operations. Thus, he was now among the considerably strong forces of the temple students, capable of accompanying Ellen on her missions.

As a result, Heinrich and Ellen had participated in quite a few operations together over the past two years.

Ellen wanted to say that she was fine, and that he could go instead, but she was already watching Heinrich's retreating figure.

The pain felt more like her soul was shattering rather than her head splitting.

Ellen took several deep breaths in place.

Her vision blurred and then cleared repeatedly.

She felt like she would lose consciousness more than once from the ringing in her head.

"Haah… Haah…"

Those who didn't know the details simply thought Ellen was exhausted.

Everyone who passed by and saw Ellen's pale face asked if she was okay, and Ellen barely managed to answer their questions.

Heinrich would take over the operation Ellen was supposed to undertake.

Knowing how much stronger Heinrich's abilities had become compared to before, Ellen wasn't worried about that.

However, amidst the strange sensation of her ego fading, Ellen desperately tried to keep her mind clear.

Someday it would disappear, but she didn't want it to vanish now.

She wanted to endure as long as she could.

Whether that was today, tomorrow, or next week, she couldn't tell.

She wanted to withstand as much as she could.

"Ellen…?"

Through her blurry vision, she saw someone approaching from afar.

She couldn't see them clearly, but Ellen knew it was Cliffman coming towards her.

Cliffman.

A-5 Cliffman.

His talent was combat.

And.

And…

"…”

As if her clouded mind was obstructing her thoughts, Ellen could only recall Cliffman's name, number, and talent from the haze.

What role Cliffman was playing now.

What he was doing.

Nothing came to mind.

Suddenly.

Ellen's vision was engulfed in darkness.

Just for a moment.

As if blinking, it was merely a brief flicker in her field of vision.

“…Ugh!"

However, as if being pulled up from deep water, Ellen regained her senses with an odd sense of ascension.

"Ugh… Hah…”

Ellen couldn't help but be taken aback.

It felt as if she had only closed her eyes for a moment.

But, Ellen was astonished by the sudden change in the surrounding scenery.

"Are you alright?"

"Ellen…"

Only a moment ago, she had been in the barracks, but now, Ellen saw a ceiling above her.

It wasn't a tent, as it should have been.

It was inside a building.

"Wh-where… where is this?"

Ellen opened her eyes to a familiar ceiling, not the canvas of the barracks tent in the open field.

Just a moment ago, Cliffman had been approaching her.

But now, Emperor Bertus and Saviolin Turner were beside Ellen, and she was lying in bed.

"Why am I… in the temple…?"

As if time had leapt forward when she closed her eyes and opened them.

Ellen knew what the ceiling she was looking at was.

This was the Temple Royal Class Dormitory's infirmary.

Though she had only closed her eyes for a moment, she had been unconscious for quite some time.

Ellen stared blankly at the ceiling, her eyes wide.

"Why… why am I… here…?"

At Ellen's question, Bertus and Turner could only look at her with pity.

Ellen learned from Bertus that she had been unconscious for about four hours.

Ellen had fainted in front of Cliffman.

After being moved to the barracks, Bertus and Saviolin Turner had taken Ellen's body under their guidance, and through a mass teleport, they had traveled to the Imperial Capital.

Though her mind felt heavy like a waterlogged sponge, her body had no issues, so Ellen was able to get out of bed soon.

The Royal Class Dormitory Infirmary.

Ellen and Reinhardt had often used this place together.

But now, with most students and teachers enlisted, not only the infirmary but the entire dormitory was empty.

Of course, non-combat personnel still remained in the dormitory, and a minimum number of staff were managing the dormitory.

However, the Royal Class Dormitory, now nearly devoid of students, maintained its grandeur but exuded a dreary atmosphere.

Spacious, but its vastness was overwhelming due to the emptiness.

The atmosphere was quite different, but the Royal Class Dormitory bore a gloomy resemblance to the Fortress Epiax.

Just by people disappearing, it became like this.

The eerie and chilly sensation was only momentary.

"But… why did you bring me here?"

That was Ellen's question.

Closing her eyes and opening them to find time had swiftly passed was shocking enough, but first, she wondered why they had brought her to the dormitory.

"We came to meet Dettomorian B-8."

Dettomorian.

A talent in magic.

Ellen had a feeling she knew, to some extent, what Bertus was thinking.

CHAPTER 516

The only follower that Bertus brought back with him when he returned to the Imperial Capital was Saviolin Turner.

There was no point in having too many people who knew about Ellen's condition.

Dettomorian's quarters were not in a dormitory, but rather in a club building.

The Occult Research Club.

Dettomorian was the sole member and president of the club, created for the self-study of shamanism.

Initially, Bertus had nothing to say about it, and it was true that Ellen was not particularly close to Dettomorian either. As such, she had only just heard about the Occult Research Club that Dettomorian had created.

Naturally, it wasn't possible for a club to function properly at this point in time.

Thus, there could be no club activities at a time when the temple was nearly empty, and the area where club buildings were concentrated was even colder than other parts of the temple.

Bertus felt a sense of emptiness as soon as he arrived in that area of the temple with Ellen and Turner.

"…”

Was this the right choice?

Was it really right to find a possibility in such a situation?

Although they failed to secure the cooperation of the Five Great Religions, the Demon King's forces, undoubtedly accompanied by Olivia Lanze, could not find the answer with their divine power.

The renowned Archmages of the continent had not found the answer either.

But just one student.

Was it right to bring Ellen here because this student uses shamanism, a power of unknown origin?

Facing the desolate landscape of the club building area, Bertus suddenly realized how absurd his expectations were.

But they had already come this far.

If it was impossible to find a solution, confirming its impossibility would still hold meaning.

"Let's go."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Turner followed Bertus, supporting Ellen who occasionally staggered and couldn't maintain her balance properly.

“…….isn't here?"

Inside the Occult Research Club.

Bertus frowned as he looked at the empty clubroom.

It was dark inside, as the blackout curtains had been drawn even though it was broad daylight. However, Dettomorian was nowhere to be found.

"And why is it so dark?"

Bertus was about to approach the curtains to inspect the clubroom.

"Don't touch it."

Ellen stopped Bertus's attempt to approach the curtains.

"Don't touch it recklessly… I don't think it's a good idea."

"……Understood."

Although it was difficult to see in the darkness, the interior of the Occult Research Club contained bizarre idols scattered around, just as Mustlang had reported.

They couldn't tell if these objects were simply placed there or intentionally installed. However, Ellen thought that nothing in this room should be touched carelessly.

No one present knew much about shamanism, but whatever it was, it wouldn't be good to touch it without caution.

"What are these… What on earth are they?"

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Bertus couldn't help but be taken aback by the strange sculptures, extinguished candles, eerie shamanism circles, and countless unidentifiable traces of research within the clubroom.

If he wasn't a student of the temple, this scene alone would have been enough to have him arrested for studying sinister dark magic long ago.

"But where is he?"

Dettomorian was said to visit the club building daily, but he was not in the clubroom.

Had he gone out for a late lunch?

"The basement."

Ellen whispered softly.

"I think he's in the basement."

"…?"

Bertus and Turner couldn't help but be puzzled by Ellen

Upon hearing Ellen's words, Turner and Bertus couldn't help but feel perplexed.

However, Ellen seemed to sense something, speaking with unfocused eyes.

The upper floors of the club building appeared unused, as did the basement.

The basement was often used as a storage space for club equipment.

Led by Ellen's strange conviction, the three descended to the basement of the club building.

-Thunk! Thunk!

"It's locked."

The large door leading to the basement was locked shut.

“…It seems to be locked from the inside."

The fact that they couldn't enter even though the lock was on the outside meant it was locked from the inside.

"It looks like he sealed it off…”

Since the building was unused, it was possible that the door to the basement had been locked shut.

However, Bertus felt an odd sensation.

"Let's go in and see."

With a single swipe of her aura blade, which sprouted from her index finger, Turner easily unlocked the door.

Upon arriving at the basement's first floor, Bertus couldn't help but frown when he saw the state of the basement, regardless of the basis for Ellen's strange conviction.

"What on earth is this?"

As soon as they entered the basement, Bertus and Turner couldn't help but feel a

chill run down their necks when they saw the strange symbols drawn on the walls and ceiling.

As if the entire space had been turned into a magical circle, odd symbols and lines were chaotically drawn on the walls and ceiling.

"There is… something here."

Just as Ellen had said, they couldn't determine a specific function, but it was clear that the basement was involved in some sort of shamanism, and that Dettomorian had locked the door from the inside while doing something.

Worried about any possible side effects, Bertus, Turner, and Ellen were careful not to step on or touch the magic circles as they continued deeper into the basement.

The basement was designed to have two floors.

Both the first and second floors were covered in unidentifiable magic circles and symbols.

Bertus let out a somber sigh as he looked at them.

"This wasn't done overnight…"

"It seems so…"

The club building had been unused for quite some time. It was almost certain that Dettomorian had locked the basement of the club building and spent a very long time drawing and setting up these magic circles, even before the large-scale military organization moved.

Despite not knowing what the magic circles meant, Bertus felt a shiver down his spine just from hearing ominous words.

The three of them soon found Dettomorian.

In the innermost part of the second-floor basement, there was a large storage room.

In the dimly lit basement, they could see numerous lit candles beyond the open door of the large storage room.

There were about a hundred large candles haphazardly placed throughout the room, with melted candle wax flowing onto the floor.

In the center of those many candles, Dettomorian sat quietly.

Amidst the light of the candles, Bertus could see the bone-made idol and numerous blood-drawn magic circles.

As if he knew about the visitors, Dettomorian slowly raised his head to look at the three standing in the hallway.

"What are…”

Bertus stared at Dettomorian, who sat quietly as if at the epicenter of a blasphemous ritual.

"What are you doing here…?"

It was frightening if there was no meaning to this, and if there was a meaning, it was clear that it wouldn't be anything good given the size of the magic circles.

With furrowed brows, Bertus shouted.

"What are you doing?"

The boy with the ever-dark complexion.

Dettomorian.

He watches them from the faint candlelight.

In the midst of the growing eeriness, Bertus asks the young shaman sitting among the candles.

"Prayer."

Dettomorian replies.

"I'm praying for 'peace'."

In a place that seems to have nothing to do with peace.

Dettomorian says he is praying for peace.

The explanation for Dettomorian's sinister ritual was simple.

Praying for peace.

Still ominous and suspicious, but Bertus knows nothing about shamanism.

So he doesn't know what function this eerie ritual actually has.

Therefore, he can neither punish nor interrogate.

He can't determine whether Dettomorian is lying or telling the truth.

"You can come in…”

Dettomorian speaks to Bertus, hesitating outside the storage room.

Passing between the candles, Turner, Ellen, and Bertus approached Dettomorian.

The ritual circle, drawn as if with blood, filled the storage room.

Could peace be prayed for with something like this?

Could it really work?

Bertus doesn't know.

"What is… prayer, anyway?"

"I don't know."

“…Huh?"

Bertus is dumbfounded by the absurdity.

"I also… don't know."

Dettomorian was staring at the dwindling candles.

"I'm just… doing what I can."

"…"

"I can't fight. This is the only thing I know how to do…"

Dettomorian looks up at Bertus with a sullen complexion.

"So, that's why I'm doing this."

The shaman himself doesn't even know what the ritual is for.

"It's just… praying, in the end, right?"

"That's right…"

Countless powerless people pray to the heavens, projecting hope onto the heroes.

It might be a meaningless ritual, merely an act of faith.

"Do you really think… this will be effective?"

Bertus looks around the storage room, then back at Dettomorian in disbelief.

"It might not be…"

Dettomorian places a half-melted, large candle on his palm.

"But… it might be."

Dettomorian stares intently at the dwindling candlelight.

Bertus feels suffocated watching Dettomorian's slow actions.

In the end, it might be a meaningless endeavor.

"You… how long have you been doing this?"

"Continuously…"

Muttering incomprehensible words.

Praying, bowing, and dancing in front of strange idols.

No matter where or what he's doing, Dettomorian continuously prays for peace.

Since the Gate Incident, for a very long time.

Dettomorian, who doesn't know how to fight, has been continuously offering prayers to an unknown power.

Continuously since the Gate Incident.

For over two years.

How is this any different from ordinary people's prayers, besides the scale?

From Dettomorian's words, Bertus couldn't tell whether he should feel emptiness or greatness in the fact that he continued to pray because it was the only thing he could do.

It might not be effective, but it might be.

However, Bertus focuses on Dettomorian's words.

Not revenge or destruction, but peace.

The words of Dettomorian, who claimed to pray for peace, are etched into his mind.

Dettomorian's personal information has already been received from Mustlang.

Originally from a primitive tribe in the North.

In a world filled with monsters in the fields and plains, the likelihood of Dettomorian's homeland still existing was slim.

Dettomorian, ignorant of the truth, ought to wish for the Demon King's death as an act of revenge.

However, instead of revenge, Dettomorian wished for peace.

"So… if your wish succeeds, let's say it has meaning. Then, in what way will peace… come about?"

At Bertus's question, Dettomorian shook his head.

"I don't know."

Dettomorian set down the candle he had been holding.

"If peace isn't achieved… my wish would have failed…"

"…"

"If peace is achieved… my wish would have succeeded…"

It was a consequentialist way of thinking.

"Of course, regardless of the success or failure of my wish… peace might come anyway…"

With a nod that seemed to imply he already knew it wasn't a foolproof argument, Dettomorian continued.

"So… it's simply good in and of itself…"

He added that he continued to wish for peace.

"Adding the possibility of hope… can't be a bad thing…"

Dettomorian's wish might fail, or it might succeed.

Or it might have had no meaning at all.

But in the end, if there was even the slightest possibility in that wish, there was no reason not to try.

So he continued to wish for peace.

In the basement of an abandoned building, which people no longer sought.

He set up strange symbols and magic circles, idols, and continued the endless ritual, praying fervently.

Looking at Dettomorian, Bertus felt an inexplicable awe.

Just as Bertus couldn't decipher the meaning of the magic circle, he couldn't know the value of this ritual that Dettomorian performed.

But he felt certain that it was not something to be disregarded.

"So… why did you come here…?"

Only then did Bertus realize that Dettomorian was speaking to him, the emperor, as if it were a normal conversation.

Although Ellen's case was exceptional, the other students could no longer consider Bertus as a friend.

However, Dettomorian showed no particular reverence or fear towards Bertus, the emperor.

This shaman acted and moved according to his own principles and values.

According to those values and principles, he prayed for peace.

"There's something you need to help me with."

Bertus still couldn't believe in the power of shamanism.

However, he decided that he could trust Dettomorian.

Bertus spoke about Ellen's condition.

Numerous spirits had taken residence in Ellen's body, and her sense of self might

vanish.

A way to remove or eliminate such spirits. Or a way to prevent Ellen from disappearing.

"…"

Dettomorian looked at Ellen, who was sitting in front of him.

Ellen was desperately trying to maintain her consciousness by focusing her eyes. However, her eyesight blurred and sharpened repeatedly, as if it were difficult for her.

As if she was breaking down in real-time.

Dettomorian examined Ellen's complexion.

The hero, Ellen Artorius.

During the time when the temple functioned properly, the two had no opportunity to speak properly.

Just as Ellen was a stranger to Dettomorian, he was also a stranger to her.

What is peace?

Dettomorian tried to achieve that peace through his wishes, but he wasn't actually bearing it.

However, Ellen had been carrying a significant portion of the weight of that peace.

"I don't have the ability to handle 'something like this'."

Dettomorian reached a disheartening conclusion as he examined Ellen's condition.

There was no solution.

Due to the stories they heard along the way, despair was evident on the faces of Bertus and Saviolin Turner.

Dettomorian rose from his seat and walked somewhere.

Rummaging through a leather backpack, he retrieved a small bone-like fragment.

Dettomorian brought a carving knife and slowly began to grind away at the bone fragment.

Chipping, polishing, and grinding.

For several hours, Dettomorian carved a symbol into the bone.

Bertus, Turner, and Ellen watched Dettomorian's actions for a long time.

Finally, having ground and carved the symbol into the bone fragment, Dettomorian punched a hole in it and attached a leather strap.

He handed Ellen the crudely shaped necklace.

It was a symbol of the moon drawn within the sun.

Though he could not touch such a thing himself, Dettomorian created something for Ellen.

It was merely a small symbol crafted without any grand ceremony.

"Can this… protect me…?" Ellen asked, staring blankly at the necklace lying in her palm.

"Anyone can make a prayer," Dettomorian replied.

While he had prayed through a massive magic circle, in reality, prayer was possible for anyone.

Setting aside whether it would come true or not.

"Just as I pray for peace…"

Like how Dettomorian prayed for peace, even though he lacked the power to change the world, he still wished and prayed for a chance.

"You, too, can pray… for yourself not to disappear."

Ellen could pray for herself not to vanish.

In a world where believing in something means someone will lend you strength, Ellen had been chosen by the gods of the moon and sun.

Hoping for protection from a greater power than her own, not just from a shaman.

Dettomorian carved a symbol of a being that could lend Ellen strength and handed it to her.

"I pray that this will become a guidepost for your soul…"

He also promised to pray for Ellen.

'May the sun and moon protect you.'

Ellen recalled something her mother had once told her.

The sun and the moon.

She carefully held the symbol carved from a bone-like substance.

"Thank you…"

Ellen put the amulet that the shaman gave her around her neck.

After receiving the amulet from Dettomorian, Bertus, Ellen, and Saviolin Turner left the temple.

Ellen and Turner had to return to the garrison.

And Bertus still had inspections to complete, so he planned to stay at the garrison for a few more days.

"Will it… work?"

In the predicament of not knowing whether shamanism really worked or not, they may have wasted their time.

They didn't know what kind of power Dettomorian truly possessed.

Whether he even had any power at all, they didn't know.

Magic proves its existence through its manifestation.

Divine power proves its existence by summoning the power of the gods.

But the three of them had not seen the essence of shamanism.

They didn't know whether it truly functioned or not. If praying for peace brought peace, then why was there a need for anything else?

Wasn't it just relying on an illusion in the face of an overwhelmingly difficult and desperate situation?

The fact that an emperor, a knight known as the empire's greatest sword, and a warrior hailed as humanity's hope all sought solace in the uncertainty of shamanism was utterly horrifying.

Bertus felt a sense of self-loathing as soon as he left the temple, wondering what he had done. He had been drawn to Dettomorian, engaged in conversation, and received an amulet, but it seemed unlikely that such a thing could protect Ellen.

He couldn't help but think this way, and he felt incredibly sorry for bringing Ellen away from the battlefield and to the temple in the first place.

"It might not have any effect," he admitted.

However, Ellen, with the thin symbol hanging around her neck, walked quietly.

"But it might," she countered.

Dettomorian had prayed for peace, knowing that it might not come, but hoping that it might.

The mere amulet might or might not be able to protect Ellen.

But since it might, she insisted, "I don't think having something like this can be harmful."

Because there might be even the slightest possibility.

Just as Dettomorian had said, Ellen would believe in it.

If she used it as a guidepost for her soul, if she believed in it, she could avoid disappearing.

If simply believing could prevent her from falling apart, then the amulet's effect was as good as real.

Ellen believed.

And so, she certainly felt that her clouded consciousness had cleared, if only a little.

CHAPTER 517

Dettomorian stared quietly at the storage room door from which the three visitors had vanished.

'The ritual has already been performed.'

He knew that the long-held offering had already reached something, and that it had come to fruition.

It was a ceremony held in the hope of peace.

However, Dettomorian could not be certain whether the ritual had truly reached a power capable of bringing about peace.

And even if the outcome leads to peace, the process could not be peaceful.

If the ritual had reached a dark power, peace would come through a dark process.

If it had reached a benevolent power, peace would come through a benevolent process.

If the ritual was weak and had reached a weak power, it would be unable to bring about peace.

A shaman cannot know the process or the outcome.

All they could do was make offerings and perform rituals, just as shamans had done since ancient times.

Dettomorian recalled the abyss he had felt within Ellen Artorius.

How could he be sure that it was not the result of the ritual's influence?

It was entirely possible that the influence of the ritual had reached and ultimately taken hold within the hero.

The impact of the offering made by Dettomorian on the world was unknown, and nothing strange could happen no matter what the consequences.

The abnormally vast collection of spirits within Ellen, which could not have occurred naturally, may or may not have been created by Dettomorian's ritual.

A shaman knows nothing and can be certain of nothing.

All they can do is perform the ritual.

Dettomorian slowly rose to his feet and began rearranging the candles.

The ritual had already been performed.

He had seen something that might have been its result.

Now it was time for the next ritual.

A more intuitive and clear ritual.

"…"

A prayer for the lost souls.

A prayer that this miasma would not grow any larger.

This was one of the most common and important roles given to shamans since ancient times, long, long ago.

The Soul Calming ritual began.

—---

"One hundred… members."

These could be considered the finest elites of Edina.

Vampire Council mages.

Holy Order knights and priests.

And even a handful of powerful demons.

Exactly one hundred members.

One hundred and five, including the direct squad I personally lead.

They were divided into five units, each consisting of twenty members.

A Vampire Lord leads each unit.

And the direct squad that would accompany me personally.

My direct squad consisted of five members: myself, Liana de Grantz, Harriet de Saint Owan, Airi, and Olivia Lanze.

Unit 1, Eleris.

Unit 2, Lucinil.

Unit 3, Luvien.

Unit 4, Gallarush.

Unit 5, Antirianus.

Each unit was led by an Archmage with control over mobility.

Five Vampire Lords, one for each unit, capable of using Mass Teleport.

We would move separately in our units, securing the path for the Allied Forces.

"The main principle is one: when encountering the Allied Forces, absolutely do not engage in battle."

There was a high possibility of unnecessary conflict.

Our enemy was the monsters of the Gate. Fighting amongst ourselves would only weaken both sides and bring about negative consequences.

"Also, when engaging with the monsters, there's no need to fight recklessly. Keep in

mind that our goal is not annihilation."

We cannot afford to lose forces while securing the route. There is no need for us to do everything.

Our goal is not to destroy the Gate on behalf of the Allied Forces, but to help them reach the Gate more quickly. The difference between the strength of humanity and ours is

Our goal is not to destroy the gate in place of the allied forces but to help them reach the gate as quickly as possible. The difference between the power of humanity and our own is still quite apparent.

We need to hasten the resolution of the gate situation.

By doing so, we can lay the foundation for the world to function properly once again.

We may not know what the ultimate outcome we must reach is.

But now, it is time for us to move towards the ending.

A massive army is, in itself, a massive consumer group.

An enormous amount of supplies is needed.

During the previous Demon War, the human army carried out large-scale supplies while installing warp gates.

However, now that warp gates can no longer be installed, and the continent is overflowing with monsters, maintaining supply lines has become impossible. Thus, most of the resource transportation relies on the mass teleportation of the great magicians.

While humanity's ability to meet supplies through mass teleportation alone is impressive, inevitably, the longer the army is in operation, the more likely it is to encounter limitations.

Therefore, if the war doesn't end quickly, there is a possibility that humanity's last

army will wither and die, not due to the fight against the monsters, but of its own accord.

To end the war quickly, this expedition must end as soon as possible.

As such, we become the vanguard of the allied forces without them even knowing, clearing the path they must take. The allied forces will eventually realize that there is a vanguard they are unaware of.

Soon, high-ranking commanders of the allied forces, including Bertus, will also learn that we are the ones behind this vanguard.

Fighting amongst ourselves is foolish, so the commanders will try to avoid conflict as much as possible.

Of course, it is naive to think that there won't be any soldiers or knights who lose their reason and charge at me upon seeing me.

So, we must avoid contact as much as possible.

And one more thing.

We need information about the allied forces.

"Be careful, Sarkegaar."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Sarkegaar bows his head.

As always, Sarkegaar will infiltrate the garrison, gather information about the allied forces' march and detailed strategy, and pass it on to us.

It might be safe to contact Bertus directly, but that would be risky.

Not for me, but for Bertus.

If someone were to hear about it, the situation would become dire.

Also, since Bertus isn't directly commanding this army and usually resides in the

Imperial Palace, our information gathering would inevitably be slow.

It's better to keep our enemies as enemies.

As always, Sarkegaar, an expert in disguise and infiltration, will relay information about the allied forces to us.

A spy not to hinder the enemy, but to aid them.

Leaving aside the reversal of roles, I can't even tell what's what anymore.

-Krrrkrrrk

We all watch as Sarkegaar transforms into a hawk and takes to the skies.

"Well, let's get started."

We have now left Edina and arrived on the continent.

We will occasionally return to Edina for maintenance, but we will be spending a significant amount of time in the field.

Until the gate situation is completely resolved.

It was going to be a long battle.

The allied forces are also utilizing a vanguard.

We don't know the specifics yet, but they are likely employing a vanguard made up of extremely powerful combatants, like Saviolin Turner and Ellen.

A unit that emphasizes mobility, including swift responses in emergencies, infiltration, and withdrawal.

If we encounter the vanguard, a headache-inducing situation may arise, so we will carry out our operations from a position further ahead than the vanguard of the allied forces.

There is no need for us to annihilate all the monsters on the march, as the absolute size of the allied forces is overwhelmingly large.

By handling just what we can, the amount of work for the vanguard of the allied forces will be significantly reduced.

There is no need to overdo it.

The five divided squads will spread out in their assigned directions, annihilating the monsters.

And, the five of us, including me who leads directly, will go even deeper.

The current target of the allied forces is the city of Rastran, a large city in the northwest of the continent.

However, before reaching that place, we must pass through numerous small and medium-sized cities, starting with the border region.

Destroying all the warp gates in the ruined territory of the once third-largest kingdom, Riselen, will end the gate crisis.

As it was too vast a territory to deal with, the empire had initially planned to restore this place as the last recovery point when Riselen fell.

Therefore, all the warp gates in Riselen's territory were untouched.

In other words, it's about reclaiming the entire territory of a nation that was occupied by monsters.

Rastran was the largest city among those located on Riselen's border.

There were a total of seven warp gates in the city.

However, monsters also come out of the gates in the small and medium-sized cities that we must pass through to reach that city.

In a way, the smaller cities are points to pass by, and the larger city is the main target.

"If the outskirts are like this…”

"Indeed…”

While the other squads were performing their missions, we were scouting at a much more advanced point.

A point so far ahead that whatever we did here would not affect the allied vanguard or our squads.

The vanguard of the vanguard, one might say.

We stared blankly at the monsters overflowing from the small warp gate in the border area of Riselen.

The distance was far, and we were hiding our bodies with Harriet's concealment magic while observing the situation from a high ground.

-Kwooooooo!

-Groooaaar!

Flying monsters filled the sky, while other monsters roamed the fields and the ruins of the city.

Their numbers were too many to count.

And the deeper we go, the more there will be.

Me, Harriet, Olivia, Airi, and Liana.

The range of what the five of us can do is much broader.

"Let's check them out one by one, see which is most effective. If we can suppress a small city by ourselves, there's no reason not to."

I look at Liana.

She could summon a lightning storm. And among us, no one can match Liana's wide-area killing ability. Even across the continent, there is no one like Liana.

Not even the magic of the Vampire Lords can match Liana's destructive power.

However, Liana has awakened a new ability, and the scope of that ability is on a different level than before.

Weather control.

It changes the weather on a regional scale.

Literally, it is a supernatural power that reaches beyond the horizon, and even further.

Moreover, this supernatural power is not manifested through the consumption of energy called magic.

"Hoo…”

With a calm expression, Liana quietly looks at the monsters boiling around her.

The ability has already been thoroughly tested.

It's not just about storms, nor is it limited to tornadoes.

Liana, who had taken a depression-inducing drug, began to manifest her power with a gloomy expression but confident eyes.

"It's going to get cold."

It's only the tenth month.

The date is too early for winter.

However, the clear blue sky soon fills with clouds, and the air changes.

Before we know it, white breaths start coming out of all our mouths.

The wind blows.

-Whoooooosh!

The wind soon turns into a fierce gust.

And gradually, flurries of snow mix with the swirling wind, and then heavy snow pours down from the sky, making it impossible to see even an inch ahead.

"It's… impossible…”

Harriet, wide-eyed, stood with her mouth agape, seemingly unable to believe what she was seeing.

A large-scale weather change.

A blizzard rages.

-Kiiiiiiiiaaa!

-Keeeeeeack!

Flying monsters crash as their wings break due to the sudden weather change and gusts of wind.

The wind brings down the flying monsters.

However, that's not the real deal.

Liana murmurs quietly in the rough gust with a stern expression.

"Let's see how many of them can survive without freezing to death."

Freezing and killing monsters that wouldn't withstand such extreme cold under normal circumstances.

That's the true power of this blizzard.

CHAPTER 518

Monsters come in all shapes and sizes.

Some have symmetrical structures, like proper living creatures, while others have appearances so bizarre that they are difficult to describe with words.

There are those that must eat to survive and those that can live without sustenance.

Some can withstand the cold, while others can survive extreme heat.

There are monsters with exceptional resistance to magic, rendering them immune to it, and those that are impervious to most weapons.

Our goal is not to kill every single monster.

We aim to cull them.

We will eliminate those that cannot endure the cold.

But we are not limited to using only the cold.

Naturally, we could also dry them out with extreme heat, like that of a scorching desert.

Liana creates weather changes across a vast area to thin out the number of monsters.

The temperature drops to around minus forty degrees.

Considering the raging blizzard, the perceived temperature would be even lower.

And it's not just the monsters that have to endure the cold; we must endure it as well.

While Liana uses her powers, we maintain our body heat with Harriet's magic, seeking shelter.

-Keuuuuuaaaah!

The monsters' cries echo all around us as they suffer in the cold.

No monsters have approached the shelter Harriet has set up.

We spend the day in a safe space, waiting for the blizzard to freeze and kill the monsters.

"Wouldn't the allied forces be shocked when they arrive?"

Olivia chuckles, hugging the light Harriet has summoned.

Outside, it's so cold that one's saliva would freeze upon leaving their mouth, but inside the shelter, it's warm.

"Well… I think by the time they arrive, the snow will have melted."

"Hmm, perhaps so?"

Olivia tilts her head at Airi's words.

The allied forces would be aware of our existence.

We would destroy the gates of a small city with just our power if we could, but we have no intention of overexerting ourselves.

"Everyone, get some rest. If the monsters find us, we'll know because of the alarm."

At Liana's words, we all prepare to sleep in the underground burrow.

Airi will help us fall asleep. Not being able to sleep properly in a strange place can lead to issues with condition management.

Airi has a role to play as well.

Liana's power is extensive, but so is Airi's.

She will send the monsters that must sleep into a slumber from which they cannot awaken.

They will die in the cold and be swallowed by an eternal sleep.

By tomorrow morning, how many monsters will still be walking the earth?

And more importantly…

"Valier."

“…Yes."

Airi places her hand on my forehead.

It's time for me to dream of Ellen killing me.

I've lost count of how many times I've died.

But there is one thing I can count.

I haven't won once.

The dreams Airi helps me have are like shadow boxing or more tangible image training, but I always lose.

No, it's not that I lose, I'm killed.

Is it because I fell asleep in a blizzard?

In my dream, I can see Ellen amidst the frozen landscape and the snowstorm.

-Whoooooosh!

In the blizzard, Ellen's black hair flutters as she looks at me.

In these dream battles, there's always something that happens.

Ellen stares at me for about three seconds.

It's merely an image I've created, having nothing to do with the real Ellen.

Her hair blowing wildly in the blizzard, Ellen's calm expression.

And eyes without focus.

Without ever speaking a word to me, she always tries to kill me.

Would the current Ellen be in a situation not much different from this?

Or is she somehow enduring it?

As long as I am supporting the advance of the allied forces, I might encounter Ellen someday.

Will the Ellen I meet then be the same as the Ellen now?

Kwoong!

The snow surrounding Ellen, who stepped on the trigger, bursts like an explosion, and Ellen charges at me through the wave of snow.

Kaang!

I deflect Ellen's sword with my Alsbringer.

I'm afraid to see the real Ellen.

With the same eyes as now, and the same attitude as now.

It seems she would try to kill me without any hesitation.

It's not the fear of death.

It was those eyes that I was afraid of.

Kwang! Kakang! Kung!

Snowstorms are whipped up by the shockwaves from the clashing swords.

I'm afraid to face Ellen.

Nevertheless, what I must do remains the same.

Whether the real Ellen is like this or not.

I will.

I will reclaim you.

By whatever means necessary.

The next day.

Since the rough snowstorm that fell overnight had piled up a tremendous amount of snow at the entrance of the shelter, Olivia and I had to clear a path to the outside.

Phwook!

"Ugh… This isn't something to do often."

"Indeed…"

Grumbling only briefly, not just Olivia and I, but also the three who followed us, couldn't close our mouths at the sight that unfolded before us.

The snowstorm had already stopped.

Even Liana, who created this situation, was present.

The whole world had turned a pristine white.

Literally, all that could be seen was snow, snow, and more snow.

As if the snow had devoured everything in the world. Not a single blade of grass in the field, not a single tree could be seen.

Of course, there were monsters roaming the land covered entirely in snow.

Large ones, medium ones, small ones.

It was clear that there were monsters capable of enduring this harsh cold.

"Almost all the monsters… are dead…"

However, the number of monsters that once swarmed like a horde of insects had already drastically decreased.

"The effect is more than just significant."

If it's more than just this feeling, then it's more than welcome.

What would have been possible only after deploying an army and engaging in a massive slaughter, a single night's snowstorm had made possible.

A feat only possible for Liana de Grantz in the whole world.

Since the number of monsters had drastically decreased, all that was left was to destroy the warp gate.

"Um… But you know."

Olivia tilts her head and points to the snow-covered ground.

"Where's the warp gate?"

"…"

"…"

Indeed.

Because everything was covered in snow, we couldn't tell where the warp gate was.

Since monsters continued to emerge from the warp gate, we had no choice but to know that the place where monsters surged was close to the gate.

Liana tried to use her power in the opposite way, to melt the snow instead of creating a snowstorm, but I stopped her.

There's no good in frequently consuming something like a depression-inducing agent.

From the snow-covered land, we discovered more unexpected effects of the weather change.

Most flying monsters had crashed and died. As it was impossible to fly in the harsh snowstorm, their wings broke and they plummeted.

Monsters that couldn't withstand the cold froze to death.

These were the expected effects.

However, a considerable number of monsters were also crushed under the accumulating snow.

In the small border town in Riselen.

I had taken on the task of locating and personally destroying the small warp gate.

Having struck and eliminated the monster spawning point, the allied forces would be able to quickly arrive here as long as they dealt with the roaming monsters in the field.

Although I didn't need to cause any changes in the weather, I was able to forge a path by melting the snow with my fire magic, so our travel was unhindered. However, the surviving monsters were also struggling, buried in the snow.

It would be nice if they just died on their own.

"I did destroy the gate, but…"

In the vast snow-covered wasteland, we were able to achieve more than our initial goal.

Not only did we reduce the number of monsters, but we were also able to destroy a warp gate, even if it was in a small town.

"Will this melt by the time the allied forces arrive…?"

The weather is still warm, so the snow should melt quickly.

We had to ponder an odd concern.

No matter how fast the allied forces advanced, there was a limit.

That's why, by successfully neutralizing a warp gate in a small town, we had achieved more than what we needed to do.

It would be pointless for us to clear a location far ahead in the current situation, when the allied forces are still quite far from us. Even if we wiped out the monsters now, they would respawn by the time the allied forces arrived.

So, we just had to maintain a reasonable distance and timing, clearing the area before the vanguard of the allied forces was expected to arrive.

For now, we just had to monitor the movement of the allied forces and assess the operational situation of each Vampire Lord's squad. We had no immediate tasks at hand.

"It seems like we can go back to Edina."

Harriet said.

Around Harriet's neck hung a necklace.

A rectangular blue cube-shaped pendant, with eight of them strung together forming a rather heavy necklace.

Power Cartridges.

An invention by Adelia, but Harriet could make them too.

As far as I knew, Adelia was continuously improving the power cartridges. She was trying to enhance not only their performance and mana capacity but also change the materials to enable mass production.

I heard she had created a new type of super-sized power cartridge called the Arc

Crystal.

A method of absorbing Cayer's mana for Redina to use.

It struck me as a rather interesting concept.

Just as Adelia had modified the power cartridges for her own purposes, so had Harriet.

Adelia had modified the power cartridges for others to use, whereas Harriet had modified them solely for her own use.

Eight power cartridges.

Auto-recharging.

When their mana was depleted, they would absorb the surrounding mana to recharge.

While Adelia focused on mass-producing power cartridges, Harriet had created a unique set.

With their materials and design, even though Harriet had made them, these eight cartridges were the only ones of their kind.

They had to be used only at the most crucial moments, and there was a risk of them breaking if used carelessly. Harriet had made them but hadn't worn them until now.

Although Harriet's mana capacity wasn't insufficient, it was far less compared to the Vampire Lords, who were comparable to Archmages.

That's why, even though she understood magic, she couldn't use it.

Those eight auto-recharging power cartridges compensated for her lack of mana.

Soon.

The absence of a Vampire Lord among us, who could be considered Edina's strongest force, was because Harriet could now perfectly fulfill that role.

It was not just teleportation, but mass teleportation that could be used.

Was it Harriet who was impressive for creating a unique power cartridge that automatically recharged? Or was it Adelia who was remarkable for improving the power cartridge so it could be mass-produced with low-grade materials?

Both were impressive. After all, both of them had only created what the situation demanded.

Anyway, we could now return to Edina.

We had told the squads led by the Vampire Lords not to overdo it, so they would prioritize retreating if they felt at risk.

Since they were conducting their operations separately, the judgment of the field commanders was the most important thing, so they would manage without me monitoring their situation.

"Hmm…"

We were sitting around a snowdrift, eating preserved food.

There was no point in clearing the way ahead before the allied forces arrived here.

We could return to Edina.

But there was nothing in particular to do when we got back.

"Asher… that guy… he's dead, isn't he?"

At my words, Harriet, Liana, and Olivia's expressions darkened.

Asher had been our classmate, and from Olivia's perspective, someone she had encountered in the religious club, Grace.

Asher from section B-4.

A talent for divine power.

We weren't close friends, just acquaintances who had exchanged words a few times.

Someone was bound to die.

Since the Gate incident, people had been dying, and as the fighting escalated, more people would inevitably die.

Wasn't it our job to minimize those unavoidable deaths?

In the original work, the protagonist, Ludwig, dies at the end.

Naturally, classmates also died. Even the character Saviolin Turner dies, so it was inevitable that there would be casualties among the students.

Ellen, Harriet, Delphin, and Scarlett, among others, survived to the end.

But the situation was different from the original work.

It was much too different.

Asher wasn't originally supposed to die.

The future had changed, altering the nature of the battles, and those who were not supposed to die began to perish.

Those who died in the original work might survive.

Conversely, those who survived in the original work might die.

Asher's death signified the beginning of such events.

It wasn't only in the arduous and cruel battles that these things happened. People could die in ways that were almost like accidents.

We couldn't save everyone, but for our classmates, if there was a way to help them avoid death, shouldn't we do it?

We couldn't know who would die in battle.

Reducing the scale of the battles our classmates faced and reducing the number of monsters was the only thing we could do right now.

There was no more we could do for those who died in battle.

However, there were other ways people could die.

Because the development and circumstances had changed from the original work, the life and death within the fights were unpredictable and could only be prevented.

But there were things that had not changed from the original work.

Politics.

Deaths due to politics would proceed as planned.

If the characters involved in politics were alive, the dynamics related to politics would have to be alive as well.

The power structure and the resulting tension would remain the same.

As long as their humanity remained the same, the desire to kill someone for political reasons would arise.

We couldn't predict the battles, but political relationships remained.

"Heinrich, remember."

At my words, Harriet and Liana nodded their heads.

Heinrich von Schwarz.

A pyrokinesis user and

the prince of Kernstadt.

He had no influence, but now he was bound to become powerful.

"That guy, he's going to be assassinated soon."

Not killed in battle, but assassinated.

At those words, Liana and Harriet's eyes widened.

CHAPTER 519

The path had been cleared.

The allied forces would soon detect the involvement of an unknown power, but not just yet.

And if the path was cleared too soon, other monsters would undoubtedly take their place.

Therefore, our troops have some time to spare until the allied forces commence their next advance.

I need to check the situation at the allied base.

Heinrich von Schwarz is to be assassinated.

However, the exact timing is unknown.

Thus, it was decided to monitor the movements at the allied base.

Although information could be obtained from Sarkegaar, who was already infiltrated, it was necessary to verify it with my own eyes.

Not only Heinrich's issue, but there were many things I wanted to see and confirm personally.

How the Temple students were faring, and how they had changed.

And how Ellen's situation was progressing; I wanted to see it with my own eyes.

The other four strongly advised against it, considering it too dangerous, but I could perform some of the tasks that Sarkegaar could do.

I could not transform into a beast, but I could easily transform into a human.

The number of allied forces is large.

Too large, in fact.

Therefore, disguising myself as a member of the allied forces and wandering around the base was not a difficult task.

Besides, this war generally does not take any special measures against spy issues, including security.

The enemies are monsters that don't speak our language.

As they always challenge us to a head-on battle, there is no need for reconnaissance or surprise attacks. Thus, there is no existence of an information war. Bertus would know that I am not a danger, so he would not be on guard against my power.

Knowing that I am watching, he might have even designed the situation to make it easier for me to grasp. Of course, that seems like a bit of an exaggeration.

Dressed as an imperial officer, I arrived near the allied base.

Harriet had teleported me here.

“…This is incredible."

Even though I had heard about it, seeing the immense scale of the allied forces with my own eyes left me speechless.

In case of an emergency, I could escape using a scroll, and if there was no crisis, Harriet would be waiting at the designated place and time to take me back to Edina.

The deadline is tomorrow.

"Your Highness, do you remember your rank and affiliation?"

Sarkegaar, disguised as my attendant, stood beside me.

"Lieutenant Lindel of the 4th Training Command, attached to the Education Command of the Imperial 1st Legion."

Of course, it was a fabrication. There might be such a position, but there was no Lieutenant Lindel.

The reason for posing as an officer was to avoid being questioned about my identity by ordinary soldiers.

As for the affiliation with the Education Command, it was because they were in very small numbers at this allied base.

Their role was to train the recruits gathered through conscription offices on the Imperial Highway and then deploy them to this battlefield via mass teleportation along with supplies, so there was little need for them to be on-site.

However, there were still a few.

In fact, there were officers at the base, but their numbers were very small. This meant that there would be very few occasions when someone would question why they had never met a training officer like me before.

Other officers would simply accept the explanation that I was a training officer and move on.

Hence, a disguise had been created that allowed me to move around the base comfortably without interference.

It was Sarkegaar, who had managed to grasp the situation at the base in just two days, who recommended this disguise.

From the beginning, even this was not a necessary procedure.

With so many soldiers and officers stationed at the garrison, even those belonging to the same army couldn't possibly know each other.

Observing the overall situation of the allied forces was Sarkegaar's role.

There was only one thing I wanted to confirm with my own eyes.

The state of the Temple Royal-class garrison.

Sarkegaar was generally faithful to his duties.

I thought he'd manage on his own, but I had given Sarkegaar a rather daunting task.

Without any foundation, I had simply sent him, with the ability to transform, to enemy territory. Collect information, I said.

Yet in just two days, not only had he grasped the entire layout of the vast garrison and the distribution of the allied forces, but he had also come up with a plausible disguise for me, who could not transform into animals or insects.

No, but doing a good job in itself creates problems.

If he does well with nothing in enemy territory, I expect him to continue doing well, which creates a certain expectation.

What is an outstanding subordinate…?

Does doing a good job mean eventually taking on increasingly difficult tasks?

If being outstanding makes one more vulnerable, wouldn't it be better not to be outstanding?

The garrison was so noisy that even if Sarkegaar and I spoke casually, no one could eavesdrop.

“Move! Move it quickly!”

“Emergency assembly! Fourth squad, gather!”

Of course, shouts could be heard throughout the garrison.

Clang! Clang! Claaang!

Pusheeek!

Sounds like weapons being hammered echoed.

"It seems quite busy."

"Yes, while the higher-ranked fighters aren't too busy, equipping the lower-ranked soldiers with weapons takes a tremendous amount of time."

"I see…"

Master class fighters can use Aura Blades, and high-quality weapons are provided to the higher-ranked fighters. For example, enchanted weapons.

The longsword with the automatic repair function that Ellen and I used in Darkland is a valuable item. These high-quality items are more durable due to their original quality, even if damaged in battle.

Lower-ranked soldiers don't even have a chance to hold such weapons.

Inferior weaponry is their lot.

So, once they are sent into battle, even if they survive, their equipment is bound to be damaged.

Hence, countless weapons must be forged by blacksmiths in the garrison until they can withdraw from setting up the garrison.

Spears and swords, bows and arrows.

Clang! Clang!

Sounds of weapons being forged and polished, and the reddened faces of the allied forces' blacksmiths were visible.

Seeing firsthand how many people war requires, and how many more non-combatants, who in some ways are more important than combatants, must be attached, it felt real.

I knew in my head that war was not just about swords and spears, but seeing the bustling allied forces' garrison made the war feel tangible and close.

I too am playing a part in this war, but our small group can return to Edina, which can serve as a headquarters, at any time.

This army is so large that only a very limited number of them can travel long distances through mass teleportation.

Most of them won't be able to return home until the war is over, and strictly

speaking, there will be even more who have lost their homes altogether.

I could also hear people's conversations if I focused.

“At least we're not starving. That's something.”

“What's the point if we die tomorrow?”

"Have you ever been so hungry you wanted to die? I'd rather be here."

In the midst of war, it was said that soldiers were the safest.

Some people thought it was better to be enlisted now, able to escape starvation, while others feared the shadow of death.

The hatred, fear, and hope of the people were felt as intensely as the war itself.

Conversations cursing me came and went, as did those praising Ellen.

There were those who worried about whether it was possible to sustain this army until the end of the war.

And there were conversations among officers concerned about the fate of humanity if the army were annihilated.

"What would happen if the Demon King attacked us now?"

"No matter how strong the Demon King is, we have Turner and the Hero here. How could he attack us without going mad?"

"Didn't you hear about the Demon King slaughtering dozens of Swordmasters in the Imperial City?"

"But in the end, he lost to the Hero. He was stabbed in the heart. The Demon King might already be dead."

I walked through the Allied Forces' base with a bitter smile.

"Wow… it's huge."

The base was vast, and there were many people.

So, there were too many conversations of various kinds.

Not only chit-chat but also the ever-present sounds of longing for a successor in an army like this were numerous.

And then there was something odd.

"Wow!"

Somewhere, soldiers gathered, admiring something. It seemed that something unexpected was happening there in the midst of war.

"Grr! Grr!"

"Told you, I can handle dogs."

There was a soldier making a scruffy brown dog sit and stand, performing simple tricks, and other soldiers watching.

"What… is there a dog here? Is it a military dog?"

Judging by the scruffy appearance and obvious mixed breed, it wasn't a military dog. It wasn't the kind of war to handle military dogs in the first place.

"It seems that surviving wild animals have been drifting into the Allied Forces' base. Or perhaps humans have found them and deliberately brought them in."

Just as humans were surviving this chaos, so were the animals.

"As you can see, the commanders seem to have no objections, as it helps boost the morale of the soldiers. There seem to be quite a few units like this."

It could have been rescued or sought out by humans, thinking they would protect it.

"Wow!"

The soldiers praised the simple tricks performed by the wild dog.

The survivors protected the surviving animals.

It was just a dog. They would probably feed it and take it with them, whether it belonged to a platoon or a company.

They would cherish the dog, even though it had no role in this war.

It was a meaningless act, but it was precious precisely because it was meaningless.

Sarkegaar watched the scene quietly.

"Your Majesty."

"Hmm."

"I wished for the destruction of all humans."

Sarkegaar watched the soldiers smiling at the single dog.

"But… I don't think I wanted this."

We were broken, so you should be broken too.

Sarkegaar had wanted that.

So, he watched the shattered humanity.

The scruffy wild dog.

What was the difference between that dog and humanity?

Sarkegaar seemed to have complicated thoughts. It wasn't about forgiving humanity or anything like that.

But seeing the pitifully broken things, it was impossible to simply hate them. It was a sort of inevitable emotion that he felt.

It was difficult to sum up our feelings in a single word.

All we could do was describe the landscape before our eyes.

Broken humanity laughs at a single dog.

We try to forget what we've lost, as we look at what's still left.

We passed through that scene.

"It's so damn far."

"Well, it's inevitable since the scale of the base is so large."

It took a considerable amount of time just to reach the location where the Temple forces were stationed within the vast allied base.

It wasn't for nothing that the officers moved on horseback within the base.

Of course, at this point, when we could run faster than horses in full sprint, there was no need for such things.

However, if someone with superhuman speed were to sprint through the base, it would inevitably lead to very awkward situations.

And since the Temple's garrison was considered quite important within the allied forces, it was located almost at the very center of the base, making the distance the same from any direction.

So, in the end, we managed to arrive at the location where the Temple forces were stationed within the allied base.

A significant number of Temple students had been conscripted into the military. And the Temple initially had a student population of over 100,000.

Thus, even if the force was made up of students, it was bound to be massive, and the combat prowess of the Temple students, even without Magic Body Strengthening, was on a different level compared to ordinary soldiers.

These were students who had either trained professionally in martial arts or had majored in magic.

The Temple's forces were not inferior even when compared to the main force of the allied army.

In addition, a vast number of weapons from the Temple had been placed in the hands of the students.

Sarkegaar and I entered the Temple garrison.

Naturally, the people coming and going, regardless of gender, were much younger on average compared to other garrisons.

They were students who had received the same education in the same environment, regardless of their social status.

However, many of them had lost their hometowns and countries as well.

Social status had become meaningless.

There were countless people who had lost their territories, even if they were imperial nobles.

So now, it was fair to say that everyone had become equal under the qualification of being a soldier from the student background since social status had truly become meaningless.

"They still hold classes in this environment."

"I suppose so."

I nodded in response to Sarkegaar's words.

Not only students but also teachers had joined the army.

They conducted not only combat-related classes but also occasional general education. As if to say that humanity had not yet perished.

While they couldn't frequently hold education for the future, they still held classes.

It would be the same for the Royal Class as well.

Of course, the Royal Class forces, which were even more important within the Temple's power, had almost no time for general education.

The Temple hadn't come to a complete standstill.

As long as there were students and teachers, education could take place.

As if to shout that education could happen outside the Temple as well.

With a rather despondent feeling, having witnessed the scenes I had described, Sarkegaar and I continued to walk.

At the very center of the Temple garrison, the Royal Class garrison.

I had no choice but to face the obstacle I already knew.

"A barrier…"

Around the area of the Royal Class garrison, a barrier was erected in a circular shape.

It was something I had been informed of even before Sarkegaar gathered the information.

"As I mentioned before, the Royal Class garrison has strict access control."

"…It seems so."

It seemed that there were too many people trying to catch a glimpse of Ellen Artorius, even from a distance. There were even some who attempted to infiltrate her quarters.

This wasn't something that happened in the original work.

Ludwig was the owner of the Alsbringer, and Ellen was the sister of the hero.

Their fame had skyrocketed once their identities were revealed, but the entrance had never been restricted like this before.

Could this be because of me?

Because of my existence, Ellen's fame as my rival had multiplied, and as a result, she had received more attention from the alliance. Her achievements in the Gate incident so far were also significant.

There were even cases of stalking.

Thus, they had set up measures near the Royal-class garrison, and soldiers kept a vigilant eye on any uninvited guests at the entrance.

Harriet had entered Ellen's quarters through spatial teleportation.

She wouldn't have passed through that entrance in the first place.

Disguises and fake identities were of no use.

With the warning "No unauthorized personnel allowed" posted, no one could enter without a legitimate reason.

"From here on, I'll go inside."

"…"

Sarkegaar could transform into something other than a human, so he should have been able to enter the Royal-class garrison.

But I couldn't.

I knew this from the start.

Of course, it's not entirely meaningless to have seen the alliance's movements with my own eyes, even if I couldn't verify the Royal-class garrison itself.

But having Harriet join me now and teleporting inside together would be even more absurd.

If I were to enter in this state, I would be considered an unauthorized person in the Royal-class garrison.

It was too risky to enter disguised as an insider. The Royal-class garrison wasn't that big. There might be two of the same person in the same place, which would be

insane.

Sarkegaar could sneak in undetected and observe the people inside.

But having come this far.

Having come all the way here.

Sarkegaar prepared to transform between the tents in the dimly lit garrison.

He could simply transform and fly in.

But still.

I wanted to see.

How everyone was doing.

How everyone was getting by.

I knew it would be painful to check, but.

Even so.

There were things I wanted to see with my own eyes.

"Sarkegaar."

"Yes."

"I want to do it."

“…Pardon?"

I thought of the soldiers laughing at a dog.

"People are being controlled, not animals."

It's people who are being controlled, not animals.

And while there weren't many animals, they were present.

The mere presence of an animal wouldn't be considered suspicious.

"Can't we do it?"

"Your Highness…"

"No, I mean, we can at least try, right?"

If I were in the form of an animal, I could enter.

I had never tried it before.

But just because I hadn't tried it doesn't mean it's impossible.

Sarkegaar could transform into an insect or a dragon using his shape-shifting ability.

But I had never tried it.

I didn't dare attempt it because of the risk of not being able to return to my original form.

So, I always tried to maintain a "humanoid" form, whether as a human or a demon.

But now, it was impossible to enter disguised as someone else.

Although I could have received the information from Sarkegaar's mouth, I wanted to see it with my own eyes.

There would have been no need to come here in person if I wasn't going to see it with my own eyes, but rather just hear about it.

Sarkegaar looked bewildered when I suddenly mentioned I would transform into a beast.

However, I believed I would be able to return to my original form.

If not, self-suggestion or a spell would work somehow.

It would be ridiculous if, after coming this far, transforming into a beast caused the situation to go awry and I couldn't return to my normal self. After all, there were measures in place for situations where I couldn't return, like achievement points or something similar.

Thus.

I found a blind spot where people's gazes wouldn't reach in the temple garrison.

-Meow

I had become a cat.

Why a cat?

Firstly, cats are small and can hide here and there to eavesdrop on conversations, and even if discovered, people would likely let it slide.

People tend to forgive cute things, no matter how suspicious they may be.

That's just how humans are.

Transforming into a dog would be risky, as I might suddenly be leashed, and it would be harder to hide.

My belongings and clothes hadn't fallen to the ground.

I wasn't sure, but I thought there might be some function in Sarkegaar's ring, similar to how he didn't appear naked when he transformed from a beast back into a human.

However, the ring was invisible, hanging from my ear like a piercing.

And the problem.

Moving my limbs wasn't easy.

It's hard to describe.

The feeling wasn't that of moving my limbs, but rather like operating a machine I had never used before in my life.

It was like having to control a fighter jet I had never flown before…

Or should I say, more like a mobile suit?

Well, I hadn't tried either, so there was no point in making the comparison.

-Shiver

I felt helpless.

My limbs wouldn't move as I wanted them to!

No, they weren't limbs.

All four legs wouldn't move as I wanted! I couldn't even walk!

Were my legs not in sync with the cat's?

How could I extend my claws?

Should I have some sort of instruction manual for operating a cat's legs in my head?

I couldn't do anything but tremble in place, lifting my right front leg and shaking it, then lifting my back leg and shaking it.

-Thump!

In the end, I couldn't even stand up properly and collapsed onto my side.

I was completely helpless.

-Shiver

Lying on my side, I could only tremble; my body wouldn't move properly.

Was it always this difficult?

How did Sarkegaar manage all this time?

I was struggling with a four-legged cat, but how on earth did he manage with insects or winged creatures?

-Meow!

He could even speak, but I could only make a meowing sound.

"…"

Sarkegaar stared down at me as I lay on my side, flailing my legs.

Why did I bother?

It seemed that was what he was thinking.

-Swish!

Eventually, unable to bear it, Sarkegaar transformed as well.

Into a cat similar to me, but slightly larger.

-Mew

-Boing! Boing!

Sarkegaar hopped around in place.

It was as if he was asking me to follow his lead.

-Swat!

Why did the tail go up?

-…

Sarkegaar, the mysterious cat, stared at me.

He shook his head quietly.

You mustn't.

Stop it.

Return to how you were.

It was a gesture that clearly conveyed such determination.

No, first of all, forget about changing! I don't know what it is, but I still don't know how to control it!

If you know, you can do it!

Is there no instruction manual?

-Waaah, waaah, waaah!

As I wailed, Sarkegaar stared at me for quite a while.

Then, tapping my foot, it seemed to try to teach me something one by one.

But.

Honestly.

I had no idea what it was trying to teach me.

CHAPTER 520

Among the temple garrisons, the entrance to the Royal Class garrison is guarded by security guards loaned from the temple itself.

Of course, only those of confirmed status and carefully chosen individuals are entrusted with this role. The individual strength of each Royal Class student is important, but the famous hero, Ellen Artorius, resides here as well.

Not only do various social climbers gather here, but also high-ranking officials and famous people from various countries come to mingle. Ellen's fame is truly beyond description.

As a result, the gatekeepers of the Royal Class garrison are composed of individuals who can ignore and snub the rude nonsense of high-ranking officials, starting from "Don't you know who I am?" to "Call Ellen for me at once."

Thus, this garrison is strictly off-limits to anyone other than the designated personnel, and if one attempts to sneak in or is caught inside, the level of punishment rises up to the level of the imperial emperor.

Of course, knowing this, there are still those who continue to linger.

Such strict access control.

Absolutely no access for anyone other than designated 'personnel'.

The control only applies to humans, after all.

“…Huh?"

As always, the gatekeepers, who were on high alert against the swarming social climbers and clueless officials, widened their eyes as they saw a cat walking towards the entrance of the garrison.

"A cat…?"

"What's a cat doing here?"

"Right?"

Only one cat was approaching.

However, the black cat that was walking had another small black kitten hanging from its mouth by the scruff of its neck.

-Meow

The dangling kitten let out a pitiful cry.

Boldly, the black cat entered the Royal Class garrison without even bothering the gatekeepers.

"Strange… We often see dogs, but now a cat? Did it sneak in with the supplies?"

"No way."

As the cat was not subject to access control, the gatekeepers merely stared at the small black kitten and the black cat without taking any action.

The guards soon witnessed a peculiar sight.

The mother cat, who had boldly entered the Royal Class garrison with the kitten in her mouth, carefully set the kitten down in the middle of the bustling base.

Then, she dashed away like a shot arrow, climbing the barrier wall of the Royal Class base before disappearing.

-Meow!

The guards stared at the baby black cat lying on the ground with bewildered expressions.

“…Did she abandon it?"

“…Seems like it."

Sarkegaar had abandoned Reinhardt.

-Meow!

The cry of the baby black cat sounded like a simple plea for help from a small animal.

The intended meaning was, "Hey, what am I supposed to do if you leave me like this?" but who could understand that?

Naturally, the sudden appearance of a small animal in such a place couldn't help but attract people's attention.

“…What's this? Why is there a cat here?"

The first person to discover the cat was the teleporter, Kono Lint.

Naturally, as many people heard the cat's cry, they began to gather one by one.

Everyone, except those on duty and away from the base, gathered at the sound of the familiar but strange cry of the small animal.

Kono Lint, Adelia and Christina, who were conducting research at the garrison, Louis Ancton, and other Royal Class students couldn't help but gather as well. After all, not only were there second-year students, but also upperclassmen and underclassmen.

It was undoubtedly rare to encounter a beast, especially a young one, in a place like this.

"How did a cat end up here?"

"Well, there's a place where they keep dogs, so it's not impossible for there to be a cat."

"I saw a big cat that looked similar running away earlier. Did it abandon this one?"

"What should we do? It's so pitiful…”

"How can it be this cute?"

"Do you think someone was raising it?"

"It had a mother, remember?"

-Meow!

Of course, the original plan was to transform into a cat, stealthily wander the garrison, eavesdrop on conversations, and spy on them. However, he failed to master the transformation technique, and instead became a spectacle.

Kono Lint, the first to discover the creature, grabbed the struggling kitten by the scruff of its neck.

"Hey, hey! Be careful!"

"No, that's not it…"

Kono Lint, who had suddenly picked up the small beast, looked at the black kitten and tilted his head.

"Hey, does it look like it's hurt somewhere?"

-Purr

The black cat, trembling and unable to stand on all four legs, looked to be in bad shape to anyone who saw it.

-Meow!

Of course, no one understood that it was actually shouting, "Put me down, you bastard!"

The pitiful black kitten, seemingly abandoned by its mother, was transferred to the canteen tent.

It wasn't shivering from the cold, nor was it unable to stand on all four legs due to pain.

So, even when they covered it with a blanket, the shivering didn't stop, and casting a healing spell wouldn't allow it to stand properly.

"It must be in a lot of pain."

"Why isn't it getting better?"

"It's so adorable…"

Naturally, the corner of the large canteen tent was bustling with students.

The desolate and brutal atmosphere of war was far from the happiness felt when looking at something cute.

That's why all the students gathered around this poor but precious visitor who had suddenly appeared.

They brought a plate of milk from the canteen, thinking the kitten might be hungry, but it just trembled and couldn't bring itself to eat.

"That's it!"

Kono Lint, who had been watching, clapped his hands.

"It might be stressed out because too many people are staring at it."

Everyone, both seniors and juniors, nodded at Kono Lint's words.

Stress was everyone's enemy, and it could be a big threat to such a small creature's life. Even if they didn't know for sure, they had a gut feeling about it.

"Let's leave it alone for now."

Supernaturals and superhumans, who would get involved in anything, were now united in their concern for a single kitten.

As they crowded around and then dispersed, the black kitten shivered and watched them.

It didn't take long for the seemingly trivial but huge news of a kitten appearing in the garrison to spread.

Thus, the stream of curious students visiting the canteen didn't stop.

Of course, not everyone was interested.

“…How strange."

Redina tilted her head, but seemed to have no interest as her own tasks were a priority.

It wasn't unheard of for surviving animals to be around, and Redina's shoulders were too heavy to be excited by the appearance of such a creature.

However, most people did show at least a little interest.

The battlefield was an incredibly tense place.

Just as soldiers kept hunting dogs, the Royal Class students in the desolate emotional desert of the battlefield wanted to see the small animal, even if just for a moment.

And among them was Adriana, a former temple trainee who ended up joining the royal class.

"Where does it hurt…?"

-Meow

Like other faith students, Adriana cautiously approached the kitten and cast a healing spell on it.

“…It seems to be more effective when Adriana does it?"

The black kitten, which had only been trembling and limp until now, began to stir and lift its head, rubbing its face against Adriana's finger.

"How did it get all the way here…? Poor thing."

Adriana showed a sad smile as she watched the small kitten nuzzling her finger.

Whether it was empathy or something else, it was clear that the kitten seemed to like Adriana very much.

After petting the kitten for a while, Adriana received a mission call and hurriedly left the dining tent.

"I came here to eat…”

In the end, Adriana got so distracted by the kitten that she had to go on the mission with an empty stomach.

It was unclear whether Adriana's healing spell had been effective, but as numerous students bustled about and cared for the kitten, it gradually regained its strength.

Although the circumstances were entirely different, it definitely appeared that way to the onlookers.

The trembling subsided, and the kitten began to move its limbs somehow.

Eventually, it managed to stand on all fours from under the blanket.

"Look, it's standing."

The students, careful not to startle the kitten, watched it with bated breath, as if witnessing a miracle.

Many students watched the kitten move cautiously, one step at a time, as if learning to walk for the first time.

The kitten began to walk in circles within a certain range around the blanket, as if practicing something.

Although Kono Lint had advised them not to bother it, everyone couldn't help but be excited by the arrival of this unfamiliar guest.

"But did the mother cat abandon this one?"

"Seems so."

Adelia and Christina whispered to each other, watching the kitten as it had just started to walk.

"Aren't you hungry? Eat this."

Christina pushed a plate of milk towards the kitten, but it didn't even look at the plate.

It was as if the kitten wasn't hungry at all.

Milk was, after all, not a common food in this situation.

"Aren't you hungry?"

Regardless of whether it was hungry or not, the kitten didn't seem to want to eat like an animal, but who would know that?

The kitten simply made noises as it circled in place, suddenly jumping or wildly swinging its front paws, exhibiting bizarre behavior.

It was as if it were testing the functions of its body.

As night fell, those who had been on missions began to return one by one, unless they were on long-term assignments. Naturally, as word of the kitten spread, more and more people came to the dining hall to see it.

He had thought it was a covert reconnaissance mission, but his bodies didn't cooperate, causing the targets of his reconnaissance to come to him instead. However, the mission's objective was ultimately achieved.

"A kitten…?"

Upon hearing that there was a kitten where people were gathered, Ludwig tilted his head and went on to have dinner.

“…How strange."

Indeed, it was strange for a kitten to be in a place like this.

Ludwig paid no more attention to the words.

Despite seeing the gathering of people, Cliffman showed no interest and sat alone, eating his meal.

The black kitten, on the other hand, stared at these scenes for quite some time.

"…"

Scarlett crouched down in front of the kitten, furrowing her brows as she hesitated whether to reach out her hand or not.

"May I… touch it just a little?"

She cautiously asked Anna de Gerna, who was standing beside her, as if seeking permission.

"Why not…?"

Encouraged by Anna's words, Scarlett carefully reached out her hand to the kitten and succeeded in gently stroking it once.

Although the kitten didn't allow Scarlett's touch as much as it did with Adriana, it still permitted it.

"You're… you're so cute…"

Scarlett, who didn't usually show strong reactions, was at a loss, almost stomping her feet in excitement.

After confirming that Scarlett had successfully petted the kitten once, Anna reached out her hand with a wicked smile. The black kitten, as if a trauma switch had been activated, slowly retreated and left Anna feeling disappointed.

Only the kitten knew the reason for this.

If the kitten was really a kitten, being touched by many hands might have been an issue, but since it wasn't actually a kitten, it didn't matter.

Of course, the tired kitten sat among the blankets, gazing at the passing people as if

observing them.

"Shouldn't we give it a name?"

Out of the blue, Kono Lint, the one who first discovered the kitten, brought up this topic amidst the gathered students.

As if they had already decided to raise the kitten at the Royal Class headquarters.

"Right, we need a name."

Delphin nodded vigorously, seemingly agreeing with Kono Lint's words.

It wasn't just Kono Lint who had decided to raise the kitten, which had appeared less than a day ago.

"How about Black since it's black?"

"…"

"…"

"…"

"Is… is it bad?"

Amidst everyone's silent gazes, Kono Lint broke into a cold sweat.

"That's not just bad, it's too careless."

"Ah, I see…"

For Scarlett, who rarely spoke harsh words, to scold him like that, it was as if everything had been said.

"I know."

Erich de Lafaeri, who had been watching this, opened his mouth.

All eyes focused on him, wondering what he knew.

"Name it something awful so it lives a long life. Let's call it 'Poop.'"

-Meow!

"It seems it doesn't like it."

"Seems so."

"Does it understand what we're saying?"

"And why 'Poop' when it's not even a dog?"

"I heard that's how they live long lives…"

"Be quiet."

"Uh-huh…"

Erich's suggestion received indiscriminate scolding from everywhere, leaving him with no choice but to shrink back.

"How about Lily?"

Everyone began to look at the rather cute name suggestion from Christina with an approving expression.

-Meow!

However, the black kitten seemed displeased with both 'Poop' and 'Lily.'

Of course, everyone thought it was just a coincidence, not that the kitten understood their words.

Lily.

"Hmm… Lily… Lily…"

Kono Lint began to ponder the name, arms crossed.

"Hold on."

Lint approached the well-behaved kitten and lifted one of its hind legs.

"It's a male!"

-Hisssss!

At some point, the black kitten had become capable of hissing.

Too many cooks spoil the broth.

However, when there are too many helmsmen, the boat can't even make it to the mountain.

At the moment, the Royal Class was just like a boat unable to go anywhere due to having too many helmsmen.

As numerous cat names were suggested, none were decided upon, as each seemed both right and wrong.

After all, for a small creature, the Royal Class base was bizarrely stirred up beyond the numerous depressions and desolations.

It might not be a grand hope that's necessary to suppress despair.

Small things.

Protecting such small things.

Just by encountering the remaining small things, hope might appear.

Within this strange excitement, the students experienced various emotions.

As the more important the mission, the farther away from the base it occurred, Ellen Artorius returned to the base quite late.

Naturally, she couldn't help but hear the rumors about the sudden appearance of a cat, as she came for a late dinner.

Everyone vaguely knew that Ellen was exhausted lately.

That's why, as if everyone received some sort of comfort from the small cat's presence, Ellen, with a blank expression after finishing her meal, was led by the other students to stand in front of the kitten.

"It seems like a mother cat came today and left it behind."

"Maybe she wants us to raise it?"

"How about it? Cute, right?"

"…"

Ellen stared at the small animal in front of her with cloudy eyes.

A cat.

The words of the people and the existence of the small animal in front of her felt distant to Ellen.

It seemed like everything was fading away and would disappear completely.

As Ellen appeared, the cat lifted its head and looked up at her precisely.

As if trying to confirm something.

Entranced, Ellen cautiously crouched down and reached out her hand to the cat's chin.

"Oh, it's licking."

The onlookers silently watched the small cat licking Ellen's hand.

Ellen felt that the unfamiliar sensation of her hand being licked was somewhat restoring her clouded mind.

"…"

Unceasingly.

The cat licked her fingers without stopping.

Ellen felt as if the small creature's movements were somehow awakening sensations from the edges of her fading skin.

The cat's low and pitiful cries awakened her blurry vision.

Only then could Ellen see clearly what was in front of her.

A pitch-black.

Small animal.

Ellen opened her mouth and spoke softly.

"A cat……”

Everyone watched the peculiar interaction with bated breath.

CHAPTER 521

The sudden appearance of a kitten.

However, except for Adriana, the cat didn't seem to be interested in anyone else. It now appeared to take quite a liking to Ellen.

"Seems like it likes Ellen."

Adelia, who had been watching Ellen and the cat, quietly said.

"It hasn't eaten anything today. Maybe it'll eat if Ellen gives it something?"

At Kono Lint's words, Ellen turned towards him. As she did, there was a slightly warmed plate of milk that had just been brought over.

"Why don't you try giving it some?"

At Adelia's words, Ellen carefully took the plate.

Ellen looked at the cat, which was silently staring at her.

She didn't know how to read the expressions of animals.

However, she somehow felt a strange reluctance from the cat. Nevertheless, it hadn't eaten anything, and she had heard that it seemed a little sick.

Ellen gently pushed the plate in front of the cat.

While squatting down, Ellen looked at the cat.

-……

The cat alternated between looking at the plate and looking at Ellen.

As if it were being cautious.

Finally.

In the end.

Reluctantly.

The black kitten began to lick the milk from the plate.

Even though it wouldn't eat the milk given by anyone else, it eventually ate when Ellen offered it.

-Oh, oh, oh, oh.

Everyone could not help but feel, in a rather unexpected way, that Ellen could make the impossible possible.

Ellen watched the black cat licking the milk with a clouded gaze.

She slowly began to stroke the back of the cat, which was quietly licking the milk.

At present, the Allied Forces did not consist solely of the Empire's direct troops. As such, there was no reason for it to be the Empire's forces rather than the Allied Forces.

This was humanity's strongest army, which had combined all of humanity's remaining power.

Although they were being underestimated by people, the Grand Duke of Saint Owan Duchy and his magicians were enlisted, and all the remaining forces from the surviving nations had been dispatched to the Allied Forces.

Among those nations, the most powerful force, the number one kingdom Kernstadt, had naturally dispatched the second-largest number of troops after the Empire.

It was a war and a deployment that would determine the fate of humanity.

Thus, the number of troops from Kernstadt, which had succeeded in national survival after the Empire, was quite significant, and they inevitably held a very

important position in the Allied Forces.

Heinrich von Schwarz, the youngest prince of Kernstadt.

His pyrokinesis, a supernatural ability related to combat, was now so formidable that it was comparable to Liana de Granz, who had been handling lightning.

Of course, Liana had awakened her weather manipulation ability in a place unknown to them.

-Krrrrrrr!

Heinrich watched the horrifying wave of fire incinerating the monsters while riding his horse.

The troops that had followed Heinrich were also dumbfounded as they watched the scene.

Ellen Artorius had also somehow managed to unleash the true power of a sacred artifact that manipulated flames, but it was only natural that Heinrich, who solely wielded fire, was more proficient in using his abilities.

The ground monsters were turned to ashes by the terrifying wave of fire.

Next, Heinrich watched the swarm of flying monsters that soared through the sky.

Just as the ground monsters were diverse, the flying monsters were equally varied.

However, since their mobility was more flexible than the ground monsters, the flying monsters could appear anywhere.

That was also the reason they had to keep watching the sky and maintain their guard, no matter how much they cleared the surrounding areas.

Heinrich concentrated his powers as he observed the approaching swarm of flying monsters.

"Brace for impact!"

At Heinrich's shout, the troops tensed up immediately.

All the soldiers saw a red flash emanating from a single point in the sky.

-Flash!

A moment of flickering.

-Rumble!

And then, a fierce shockwave accompanied by an explosion that seemed to tear their eardrums.

Heinrich watched as the approaching flying monsters lost their balance due to the shockwave and crashed into the ground.

Flames were not his only weapon.

All the additional effects that could be generated by flames were also the power of Heinrich von Schwarz.

Each supernatural power was different, but as in the case of Liana, all powers related to destruction and strength were considered very important military assets by the alliance if the ability holders were of a certain level or higher.

Heinrich von Schwarz was a representative example, and another example was a person with the power to control wind.

Although conditional, Redina's power was also highly valued.

Heinrich, due to the nature of his abilities, often undertook large-scale missions similar to Ellen and frequently had overlapping assignments.

Thus, he often collaborated with Ellen or took on her mission if Ellen Artorius was in poor condition.

As a result, those who graduated from the Temple Royal class, especially ability holders, were well-regarded and had a significant position within the alliance since the Gate Incident, even if not as much as Ellen.

After completing his reconnaissance and annihilation mission, Heinrich returned to the garrison, receiving salutes from the soldiers who recognized him.

He was not as renowned as Ellen.

Of course, Heinrich could not have the same level of fame as Ellen, who had two relics and was considered the archenemy of the Demon King.

“Your Highness.”

“It's the prince!”

“Your Highness! Please, look over here!”

However, whenever Heinrich passed through the Kernstadt military garrison, he could not help but receive the same heroic treatment as Ellen.

Heinrich waved to the soldiers who called out to him.

Despite the ongoing massive tragedy, people always manage to find hope somewhere.

To the people of Kernstadt, the youngest prince, Heinrich von Schwarz, was regarded as one of those hopes.

Whenever people found hope in him, Heinrich felt an immense pressure deep within his heart.

But that pressure was never unpleasant.

‘Heinrich, have you returned?’

“…Yeah."

Heinrich muttered quietly at the sudden voice that seemed to pierce through his head.

Ability holders all had their respective roles, even if their abilities were not directly related to combat.

The voice that pierced his mind was the telepathic ability of B-7, Evia, who had been relaying messages.

Now that Evia's ability had experienced a leap in growth, she had taken on the role of relaying the alliance command's intentions to each unit.

Although it was not a combat-related ability, instantaneous long-distance communication might be the most critical ability in a war.

Thus, Evia was almost forced to stay near the main command center rather than the Royal Class barracks.

In essence, Evia was the sole communications soldier in this vast army.

'Go to the Kernstadt Command Barracks. The Kernstadt Military Commander is looking for you.'

“…Got it."

The voice felt like a direct stab to the brain.

No matter how many times he experienced it, Heinrich could never grow accustomed to it.

Telepathy.

It wasn't a power meant for attack or destruction.

But could it really remain unassociated with destruction forever?

If one had the ability to interfere with someone's mind from a distance, wasn't it perhaps the most dangerous superpower in the world?

Heinrich always felt a peculiar uneasiness whenever he connected with Evia through telepathy.

After completing his mission report, Heinrich, as Evia had instructed, headed towards the Kernstadt military garrison.

Heinrich, who was as famous in the Kernstadt garrison as Ellen, was saluted with awe and respect by the soldiers and knights, even if he couldn't see them from a distance.

He couldn't respond to every salute and cheer, and he was currently on his way to answer the summons of the Kernstadt military commander.

Heinrich hurried his steps toward the commander's quarters.

It took him quite a while to walk across the vast garrison and reach the hill where the Kernstadt military commander's quarters were located.

The knights and guards protecting the area saluted Heinrich respectfully and made way for him.

Upon entering the commander's quarters, Heinrich soon saw familiar faces.

Two men seated on his left and right.

"You were involved in another large-scale operation. Good work," said the serious-faced man.

"Still, isn't it too reckless to use royalty like that? Is it fine for the royal family of the empire to be expended? It seems like a protest is needed," remarked the discontented man.

Both were Heinrich's brothers.

"Enough. If we argue like that, there would be no one fit to be deployed on the battlefield."

"But brother…"

"Enough. The youngest, whom we rarely see, has come all this way; how long will you keep him standing?"

And the woman seated in the highest position.

"You're here, youngest brother. Sit down."

The sharp-eyed woman gestured to Heinrich.

"Yes, sister."

Heinrich bowed his head to Louise von Schwarz, the Kernstadt military commander, first princess of Kernstadt, and the heir to the throne.

The youngest brother.

Treated as a sibling.

Only after the world had turned out like this did Heinrich receive such treatment from his siblings who had once dismissed him.

Eldest daughter, Louise von Schwarz.

Eldest son, German von Schwarz.

Second son, Alphonse von Schwarz.

Fifth son, Heinrich von Schwarz.

All the siblings had gathered in one place.

Seated at the commander's table, Heinrich slightly avoided the gaze of Louise von Schwarz, the first princess and heir to the kingdom of Kernstadt.

In a situation where the king couldn't leave his homeland, the position of Kernstadt's military commander fell to Louise, the heir.

Moreover, she was also the captain of Kernstadt's royal knights.

This meant that in addition to her leadership abilities, her personal skills were also exceptional.

Heir to Kernstadt, captain of the royal knights, and a sword master at the age of twenty-four. Louise von Schwarz.

Heinrich had always been afraid of his sister's piercing gaze.

Heinrich's older siblings had all graduated from the royal academy of Kernstadt long ago.

Louise von Schwarz was even an exceptional talent who had graduated early at the age of eighteen.

Just as the Empire had the Temple, Kernstadt also had an academy system.

Once upon a time, there was a royal project that was expected to surpass the Temple and attract talents from all over the continent to the Kernstadt Royal Academy. Indeed, the Kernstadt Royal Academy boasted an education system that was slightly inferior to the Temple's, but was still worthy of being called prestigious.

Heinrich's brothers all attended and graduated from the Kernstadt Royal Academy, not the Temple, because the credibility of the royal project would be undermined if they did not send the royal family members there. It was akin to the Gardias Imperial Family entrusting the education of their royals to the Temple.

However.

Heinrich von Schwarz was sent to the Temple, not the Kernstadt Royal Academy.

It wasn't because Heinrich was an important person.

It was because they wanted to get rid of him.

With all his siblings gathered, Heinrich was the fifth son, making him the sixth in line.

The fourth and fifth were not present at this gathering.

No, they were no longer in this world.

In Heinrich von Schwarz's childhood, when his abilities had just awakened, they had perished in the terror he had caused.

That's why Heinrich, being the youngest, went to the Temple.

No, he was chased away to the Temple.

"My lady… why have you summoned me…?"

"Is there a reason for brothers to gather? Since you're not in our army, we don't see your face often, so I called you here to share a meal."

As Louise spoke, food began to be placed on the table at the command headquarters, one dish at a time.

The brothers began their meal sitting around the table.

The atmosphere was not lively, and there was not much conversation.

But it was important that they were all sitting together.

Brothers.

At the mention of that word, Heinrich's heart seemed to tremble.

It had been a very long time since Heinrich had been treated as a brother by his siblings.

He had been unable to attend the Royal Academy that all royals went to and had been practically abandoned at the Temple.

The Temple's elementary education began at the age of eight.

Heinrich was sent to the Temple at the age of eight under the pretext of education.

It was practically exile. The Kernstadt Royal Family may have paid for his education, but they had no interest in how he was doing or what he was doing.

From the royal family's perspective, Heinrich was nothing more than a cursed prince with the power to kill two of his brothers.

It was a simple accident and a story from Heinrich's distant, barely remembered childhood.

An accident that occurred when he was too young.

A prince abandoned when he was too young.

As a result, Heinrich found his brothers, whom he had only recently begun to encounter more frequently since becoming an important figure after the Gate incident, to be unfamiliar.

Their faces, attitudes, and actions were all unfamiliar to him.

This included his two older brothers, who had once ignored or despised him.

His oldest sister, who had always been cold and now seemed even colder.

Only now that he had accumulated achievements and become an important figure could Heinrich be treated as a family member.

The abandoned prince.

Heinrich had only been able to become a brother again amidst the reluctant attitudes of his siblings after becoming an important figure, holding the name and value of power in his hands, with humanity's fate hanging in the balance.

Heinrich had a tendency to overestimate himself.

Although he knew intellectually that he was an abandoned prince, he did not accept it.

He was a prince of Kernstadt, the second-in-line empire and the first vassal state.

That had been Heinrich's pride and confidence.

At least until some madman enrolled in the Royal Class, and it wasn't long before he was nearly torn to shreds.

Now he knew that he wasn't just a beggar with no real talent but a demon king with a shocking past that was nothing short of extraordinary. Even with this knowledge, nothing would change.

Heinrich had heard harsh words he had never encountered in his life, even being

struck by him.

And in front of his classmates, with whom he had once been fond of, he had made a fool of himself.

Heinrich realized he was weak.

He had a background to be proud of, but it did not actually support him.

He had to accept that he was no better than a beggar and, in fact, much worse.

He hadn't even properly honed the power given to him for free.

So, Heinrich tried his best.

To turn that freely given power into practical strength.

From a ridiculous classmate, Reinhardt had become a terrifying existence.

Through him, Heinrich realized what his limits were.

Thus, after the Gate Incident, while killing monsters and saving people with his own abilities, Heinrich did not slacken in improving his own skills.

Therefore, Heinrich was now a very important person.

He could once again be acknowledged as a brother by those who had abandoned him and treated him as if he didn't exist.

In the past, Heinrich had a tendency to overestimate himself.

Thus, the Heinrich of that time would have thought this way.

Eventually, my worth will be recognized, and my siblings will accept me back into the family.

Once these events were over, he would be able to return to the palace, and although he didn't aspire to become the heir to the kingdom, he could live as a member of the royal family.

He would have felt proud and filled with self-esteem.

Having been abandoned by his family, he would have been happy and satisfied to be able to return to his place, whatever the reason may be.

But now, the arrogant and reckless Heinrich of the past was gone.

Thanks to a certain someone, he learned to understand his place.

What he could and couldn't do.

Who he was.

What he needed to do.

Heinrich had become quite capable of objectively assessing himself and his surroundings.

"If this situation is resolved, are you planning to return to Kernstadt?"

Louise asked softly, slicing meat.

If it had been before, he would have answered that he would, of course.

He would have said that he wanted to contribute to the rebuilding of the nation and be acknowledged by his siblings and parents.

But now, his two other siblings were focused on Louise's question.

He sensed that they were concentrating on his answer.

I'll return to Kernstadt.

I miss the embrace of my family.

But he thought of the actions he would have to take for the sake of national reconstruction, his siblings' recognition, and the problems that would arise as his position grew stronger.

His older sister was now testing him.

How the naïve desire to return to his family would be understood and accepted.

Not only by his siblings but also by the many others who would think of him.

How they would view him.

He thought about it.

The many problems that his foolish naïveté would bring about, yearning for the embrace of his family.

He sensed that there would be people who would fear this.

Heinrich believed that his older sister was testing him.

"There is much to do in the world, and it will likely be quite some time before I can return… Even if I do return, I'll only be able to stay for a few days… If the temple is rebuilt, I'll have to finish my studies. I'm not sure when that day will come…"

Heinrich felt the tense atmosphere around his response relax.

"I see."

The feeling of being accepted as a brother again was only momentary.

He realized that a family forced to accept him because of the situation, his fame, or his power could never truly be a family.

Heinrich von Schwarz had no choice but to accept this truth.

"What a shame, truly."

Louise looked at Heinrich, cutting a piece of meat and putting it in her mouth.

Grasping the subject of the conversation.

Now, merely mentioning it brought to mind the cursed existence he had become.

Ironically, what he had learned because of that fellow was proving useful in the most unexpected places.

CHAPTER 522

After having dinner with his siblings, Heinrich was returning to the Temple garrison.

Night had fallen.

On his way back, Heinrich was mulling over the words he had heard from his elder sister.

Although she had invited him for a meal, they ended up discussing more than just food.

"I don't agree with Alphonse's belief that the Empire is only pushing you into dangerous missions, but it's true they are overworking you."

"Considering the circumstances, there's not much we can do. However, you are a royal of Kernstadt. You are an important talent for the royal family and one of the cornerstones responsible for our future. It's quite uncomfortable that the Empire is treating you this way."

"That's why I'm thinking of incorporating you into the Kernstadt command structure. This doesn't mean it'll continue indefinitely. If necessary, you'll have to cooperate with the Temple forces, including Ellen Artorious and the general headquarters."

"But before being a student of the Temple, you are a royal of Kernstadt and our sibling."

"Therefore, I believe we should have authority over matters concerning your safety."

"Youngest brother, do you agree?"

Cornerstone.

Royalty.

Sibling.

Future.

The words spoken by his sister were tickling Heinrich's heart.

How much he had longed to hear those words.

Could a few simple words make one's heart race like this?

Despite how much Heinrich wanted to hear those words and how much he treasured them, he felt strangely alienated, as if he had really returned to his family.

Heinrich was walking through the garrison, now shrouded in night.

Yes.

With this much power, he couldn't help but be recognized.

The moment this thought crossed his mind, Heinrich stopped in his tracks.

He stopped as if putting a brake on the rising arrogance in his head.

Standing still, he looked up at the night sky.

That's all it was.

He had merely been that lonely.

It was indeed strange for his heart to race at just a few words.

He had been abandoned at such a young age, turning him into a strange person.

Thinking about it, Heinrich had little memory of living like royalty, even though he was a royal.

So, he didn't know what sibling love was like among royals.

That's why he realized the odd fact that he was yearning for something he didn't even know.

There is no such thing as baseless kindness.

This would be the same for siblings, especially those who carry the title of royalty.

He was accepted as a sibling again because he had power and influence.

It wasn't him that was needed, but his power and influence.

Louise's words about taking control of his safety from the general headquarters.

On the surface, it seemed logical that he should be protected because he was a Kernstadt royal and an important person who needed to contribute to the nation's reconstruction before being a Temple student and an imperial citizen. However, the truth hidden behind it was different.

Louise wanted to make sure Heinrich couldn't be manipulated without her permission.

That meant strengthening Kernstadt's military influence over the allied forces.

He had become useful, so Louise wanted to control him.

Sibling love.

Not even knowing it, and never having tasted it before, the truth was that he couldn't get drunk on the sweetness of such an unfamiliar emotion. Once the veil of false emotions was lifted, the truth was revealed.

What if he thought about it from Ellen's perspective?

Ellen Artorious was very important to the allied forces. She had both symbolic and actual military significance.

The allied forces' general headquarters could decide which operations to deploy Ellen in.

They could order Ellen to aid the operations of the Kernstadt army, the operations of the Holy Knight Order, or be mobilized in the operations of other allied nations.

All members of the allied forces would want Ellen to fight alongside them.

If the decision-making authority was not with Ellen but with the supreme command,

everyone would have no choice but to silently follow the orders and directives of the supreme command.

Emotional decisions should not be made, but ultimately, the allied forces are a group of humans.

If those who are not in the supreme command's favor do not receive proper support, many casualties will occur.

Ellen is even capable of single-handedly resolving the battlefield.

Since Ellen's body is just one, if two operations occur simultaneously, one side cannot be helped.

The influence the supreme command possesses by holding the decision-making authority should not be underestimated.

Heinrich's case would be no different.

Ellen, who showed almost the strongest form in close combat, gained a wide range of attack abilities by awakening the Sun God's Divine Relic.

Before Ellen gained such power, Heinrich had even more destructive power.

Heinrich's destructive ability shines when facing a large group of enemies.

Therefore, Louise does not want to be swayed by the supreme command's influence as she is now, but rather, she seeks to have authority over Heinrich's well-being as an important strategic weapon to gain influence. From the moment Heinrich is incorporated into the Kernstadt army, that influence will come into effect.

It is not because they are siblings but because of the usefulness of the weapon.

What should be done then?

Is it right to follow the words of an elder sister who merely tries to use him under the pretense of family?

She wouldn't even think of him as a sibling, would she?

What good ending would there be for a brother with the sole purpose of being used by his sibling?

Is it not a grand army marching for the sake of saving the world and rebuilding humanity?

Is it right for such conflicts to arise within the army, merely over trivial leadership?

Isn't it foolish?

Very much so.

Isn't this a foolish matter?

There is not enough time to focus on a single goal; why should such conflicts of interest arise?

Heinrich walks, looking at the night sky with a lonely expression.

“…Hoo."

Heinrich knows nothing of brotherly love. He was separated from his siblings too early.

He knows even less about politics. He was removed from politics at a very young age.

Both were difficult issues for Heinrich.

Whether or not to follow Louise's words.

Heinrich could not know.

Returning to the Temple base, Heinrich felt a slight commotion within the base.

It was because Ranian Sesor was playing the guitar in the very center of the base.

The base's management soldiers, the passing knights, and even the Temple students were gathered around Ranian, quietly listening to his performance.

Ranian Sesor, who leads the military band, plays music and sings as he travels to each base.

The talent of music.

Ranian Sesor was not only capable of playing almost all instruments, but he also had aptitude in composing, conducting, and singing.

If it were peacetime and Ranian Sesor could graduate from the Temple normally, he would undoubtedly have become a famous performer, composer, and conductor across the continent.

However, at the onset of humanity's last march, Ranian Sesor plays music and sings for the soldiers who have lost or left their hometowns.

Music is a talent utterly unrelated to battle.

However, Heinrich knew that the role entrusted to Ranian Sesor was of great importance.

Heinrich often felt the value of music, which breathed life into the depressed and soothed the heart with gentle melodies, whenever he listened to Ranian's performances after the Gate incident.

Though it was a talent unrelated to combat, Heinrich thought Ranian's gift might be what people needed most.

Ranian played the guitar with a serene melody, and sang to the people in a low voice.

The song carried a message that peace would someday come.

Most of the people at the temple garrison were listening to Ranian's song.

Ranian Sesor had composed quite a few songs since the Gate incident.

In fact, there were quite a few popular songs about Ellen defeating the Demon King Valier.

After seeing Ellen's face turn pale and her retching when she heard the song about herself, Ranian decided not to create any more songs with her as the subject.

Though songs about heroes were the most popular, Ranian had neither created nor sung any songs about Ellen since then.

Whether it was due to the pressure or something else, Ranian knew that Ellen was terrified of such songs.

Heinrich saw Ellen, sitting on a wooden box in a secluded corner, concentrating on the song.

Ellen, burdened with too much weight, was pitiable to watch. Heinrich could not tell what had changed, but he saw a necklace around Ellen's neck that he had never seen before.

And she held onto that necklace with one hand as if it were something precious.

Had the fatigue finally been resolved?

Heinrich, too, was entrusted with a heavy duty, but he knew the burden Ellen carried was of a different magnitude.

It was a weight that one person could not bear.

“…Huh?"

However, Heinrich couldn't help but notice something slightly different than usual.

People were focusing on Ranian's music, but they kept glancing at Ellen.

There was something on Ellen's lap.

"A cat?"

A black cat sat on Ellen's lap, and she continued to stroke its back.

"You're here."

Turning his head at the sound of his name, he saw Kono Lint, who always had a playful expression on his face.

"Uh… What's that? A cat?"

At Heinrich's question, Kono Lint shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, you came late, so you don't know. It was quite a commotion today because of that cat. It suddenly came and was left behind."

“…Really?"

"Ever since Ellen returned, the cat has only clung to her. I don't know if it knows something or not… But I'm glad Ellen seems to like it."

Kono Lint looked at Ellen with a sympathetic expression.

Everyone in the Royal Class knew the real danger and pressure Ellen faced.

While she was admired and worshipped elsewhere and had expectations placed on her, in the Royal Class, Ellen was perceived as the most unfortunate and vulnerable person in the world.

Except for a few.

Ellen absentmindedly continued to stroke the cat's back, and the cat entrusted its body to her touch while looking at the garrison.

The cat.

An unexpected presence, but there was no law that it shouldn't be there.

"I don't know if someone is secretly raising the cat or if it escaped from someone who was raising it. But since people like it, I think it's fine."

“……Is that so?"

"Yes, more importantly, it seems like Ellen enjoys it too. Maybe she'll end up taking care of the cat? But does Ellen even have time for that?"

"Well, someone else can take care of it."

“……True."

These days, Ellen seemed extremely exhausted, but she now had something to focus

on. Whether it was a source of comfort or not, she was paying attention to something.

Maybe that's all that mattered.

The sight of Ellen stroking the cat was quite unusual to Heinrich.

He also felt something strange.

He had the feeling that the cat was staring directly at him.

It was a penetrating gaze.

An animal's gaze, but for some reason, it felt like something was being analyzed, a very eerie sensation.

He felt that the creature was looking right at him.

'There's no way.'

Heinrich laughed softly, thinking he was being oversensitive because of the events of the day.

The performance continued, and although Heinrich was fascinated by the cat's presence, he didn't want to distract Ellen, who seemed to be focused on something.

-Meow

As the cat let out a low meow, Ellen blankly nodded and tickled the cat's chin. Just as the cat seemed to like Ellen, it was unclear, but it appeared that Ellen liked the cat too.

No matter what it was, if it could breathe life into this gloomy garrison, Heinrich thought it would be a good thing.

It could be the music of Ranian Sesor or the unexpected kitten that appeared.

Kono Lint patted Heinrich's shoulder.

"Anyway, a letter came today. The kids and I are going to open it together. What do

you think?"

"Sounds good."

Heinrich nodded at those words.

It was a quiet night filled with the sound of a cat's meow, instruments, and singing.

CHAPTER 523

In these times, where the grand magic of mass teleportation is essential for supplies, letters are considered somewhat of a luxury item.

Still, letters arrive at regular intervals.

For the soldiers on the battlefield, receiving letters inquiring about the well-being of their families can provide a significant boost to morale, as it allows them to remember those they are fighting for.

Of course, considering the size of the army, the number of letters inquiring about loved ones could be so large that it might disrupt the delivery of other crucial supplies.

Under normal circumstances, that would be the case.

Regrettably, a significant number of soldiers have lost the families with whom they would have exchanged letters.

Therefore, the number of arriving letters is small, and ironically, due to their limited volume, the high command can occasionally deliver them.

After Ranian Sesor's performance had ended, Heinrich headed to Lint's barracks.

The letters had already been sorted by recipient.

In the barracks were Kono Lint, Heinrich, Cliffman, and Erich de Lafaeri.

As usual, Cliffman was coldly tearing open his letters one by one.

"Where's Cayer?"

At Lint's question, Erich shrugged.

"He's probably hugging the Ark Crystal. He said he can't come and that he'll sleep there tonight."

The Ark Crystal – a large-scale magical energy storage artifact.

Although Redina nagged him daily, Cayer felt responsible for the only task he could do.

Although they missed each other, neither shirked their duties.

However, they couldn't help but resent each other, even though they knew that it wasn't the answer to blame one another in unavoidable circumstances.

The best duo, yet they can't stand each other.

"Then I'll just deliver these to him."

Kono Lint picked up a few letters for Cayer, and in the blink of an eye, he vanished.

Whoosh!

Reappearing from thin air, Kono Lint no longer held the letters in his hand.

He had teleported to the Ark Crystal, handed the letters to Cayer, and returned.

"Wow, you've really grown."

At Erich's words, Kono Lint grinned.

"Indeed, I have. Even I can see that."

At Kono Lint's words, both Erich and Heinrich laughed.

Gone were the days of the weakling.

Having moved beyond the era when only naked teleportation was possible, Kono Lint's abilities were now free of penalties.

"Anyway, you've got the most letters this time."

At Lint's words, Heinrich took a seat.

Heinrich had received the most letters.

An almost suspiciously large number.

Most of the letters on the table were not from their families.

Neither Kono Lint, Erich, nor Cliffman had any letters from their families.

Their hometowns had disappeared due to the Gate incident, so there were no letters from family members.

Although they hadn't all witnessed their families' deaths, at some point, they had to accept that their families were gone from this world.

Their grief and anger were buried deep within their hearts, but they didn't bring it up.

Yet, there were letters in front of Erich, Kono Lint, and Cliffman.

Among them, Heinrich had received the most.

Erich grinned, arms crossed.

"It's only natural that the guy who saved the most people gets the most letters."

These were letters from the people they had saved.

"No, if you really want to compare, I've saved a lot too! Killing monsters is difficult, but nobody can match me in rescue missions."

At Kono Lint's words, Erich chuckled.

"Well, I know that, but it's natural to be more shocked by the sight of a monster horde being burned to death right before your eyes. You move so quickly that people don't even realize they've been rescued. Wouldn't Heinrich be the more impressive one?"

Kono Lint sighed deeply, picking up an envelope.

“…You're right. Darn."

At the Royal Class garrison, Heinrich was the officer who received the most letters.

Not Ellen.

The number of letters addressed to Ellen was so overwhelming that they weren't even delivered.

Even if Ellen were to receive them, she couldn't possibly read them all, and if they started delivering the letters, it would cause disruptions in the transportation of other supplies. The letter delivery office even had warnings posted that letters addressed to Ellen could not be sent.

That's why Heinrich, who was next in line in terms of fame after Ellen, inevitably received the most letters.

[Hello, Heinrich. You may not remember me, but I'm Seria. You saved me in Aristol last year. I sent a letter before, but I'm not sure if you received it.]

To be honest, Heinrich couldn't remember the faces of those he had saved.

There were just too many.

However, when they mentioned the region, Heinrich could vaguely recall what he had done there, how many people had died, and how many he had saved.

Those who sent letters were children, adults, and even soldiers who had once fought alongside Heinrich.

Most of the letters from soldiers were from those who could no longer participate in battle. They had suffered life-threatening injuries and had become disabled due to not receiving timely treatment.

They would send letters wishing Heinrich well.

Some would send letters periodically, not just a single greeting.

Although Heinrich didn't know their faces, he would remember their names.

There were times when he couldn't spare the time, but when he was based in the Empire, he would occasionally make time to send replies.

The contents of the letters varied, but ultimately, they were all expressions of

gratitude and well-wishes for Heinrich.

Heinrich usually tried to read all the letters that arrived in front of him.

Having witnessed so much death, he sometimes felt despair, wondering what the meaning of it all was. These letters would remind Heinrich that what he had done was not meaningless.

So, just as they found hope in Heinrich, he found hope in these letters.

That they could somehow continue to live.

That they could somehow survive.

And so, Heinrich would read the letters with a solemn expression.

Kono Lint and Erich read all the letters that had arrived.

Erich, too, had been someone who was just a little stronger than others at the beginning of his admission, not particularly pulling his weight.

But talent.

Only a very few people with talent could be admitted to the Royal Class.

Talent was rare.

Erich had no choice but to accumulate a vast amount of practical experience, in addition to a growth enhancer called Moonshine.

As a result, Erich de Lafaeri acquired combat abilities and divine power comparable to those of a high-ranking knight of the Holy Knight Order.

They were the chosen talents from across the continent.

It might have been natural for such talent to grow so quickly. It was perhaps inevitable for someone to achieve a level that would take decades of bone-crushing effort in a short period.

Furthermore, Erich's growth rate to reach the level of a high-ranking knight in just a

few years was actually average within the Royal Class.

Compared to Ellen and Reinhardt, everyone else's growth rate seems painfully slow. After all, these two are beings of a different dimension, incomparable to anyone else.

One is a hero, the other a demon king.

Excluding those two, there are a few individuals within the Royal Class who have exceptionally fast growth rates.

A prime example would be Cliffman, who received the most letters after Heinrich, or B-11 Ludwig.

Both of them had awakened their Magic Body Strengthenings on their own before the Gate Incident. With the assistance of Moonshine, they have both reached the cusp of the Master Class.

Their refined power and magical abilities indicated that they might reach the Master Class before the year's end.

There are others, like Delphin Izzard, who awakened a completely new power: the Spirit Arts.

Scarlett, for example, was highly regarded as a top-level power, although not quite on the same level as Ludwig or Cliffman.

With a stern expression, Cliffman read all the letters and carefully tucked them away.

"I'll be going."

As Cliffman tried to leave the barracks, Lint called out from behind him.

"Hey, how long are you going to keep going solo? It used to work, but now we move with the army. There are limits to acting alone."

"…"

At Lint's call, Cliffman remained silent in his place.

After a moment, Cliffman spoke tersely.

"Alone is better."

"No matter how confident you are, that's not wise. You might really die."

"Maybe…”

Cliffman murmured quietly.

"It's always worked out somehow. It'll work out in the future, too."

Leaving those strange words behind, Cliffman left the barracks. Kono Lint stared at the entrance and laughed bitterly.

"I'm worried he'll really die in some tough situation like that…”

"Leave him be. In my opinion, his talent is supernatural."

Erich sighed deeply at Kono Lint's words.

"I do think that, but…”

Cliffman, a combat genius.

The purpose of his talent is victory.

Achieving victory somehow is the function of his combat talent.

"I would be scared to lead a unit, too, if I experienced returning alone after all my comrades died several times."

"Well, yeah, but…”

Combat is always unpredictable.

Unforeseen situations may arise, and there are experiences of facing far too many enemies, or encountering extremely unfair opponents.

During the long, arduous time dealing with the Gate Incident, countless units were annihilated, unable to cope with these variables.

Cliffman killed numerous monsters and saved many people in response to the Gate Incident.

And countless times, he faced unexpected situations.

His comrades were wiped out, whether they were with him or led by him. There were even operations where he had been with Master Class members.

There were times when he faced a large number of enemies and times when he encountered extremely powerful foes.

Cliffman faced life-or-death situations numerous times.

But each time, he somehow survived.

Even when people much stronger than him were slaughtered, Cliffman managed to kill the monsters, crushing, tearing, and annihilating them, emerging alive on his own.

As for who killed the most monsters, opinions vary.

It could be Ellen, or maybe Saviolin Turner, or even Redina.

But when asked who performed the most miracles, the answer was always Cliffman, not Ellen.

Both Ellen and Cliffman always achieved victory.

However, the process was different.

Ellen was always stronger than her enemies.

The enemies' attacks couldn't penetrate Ellen, and her Void Sword easily tore through the monsters' flesh.

But Clifman was different.

Clifman had often faced foes who were stronger than him and beyond his abilities.

Yet, he still emerged victorious.

He always returned, grasping the gruesome results of victory.

But many times, his comrades did not return with him.

Thus, Clifman started to move alone at some point.

If somehow winning was his talent, and if that talent only protected his own life,

there was no need to be with someone else, he argued.

If some supernatural power beyond talent dictated this ability to fight and always emerge victorious, he would stand alone on any battlefield.

He would somehow bring victory.

So, he didn't need comrades.

That was Clifman's claim.

Of course, the royal family and the high command didn't blindly throw Clifman into any battle, relying on his supernatural power. They wouldn't risk their certain resources on an uncertain force that might lead to death.

Therefore, Clifman moved alone.

It was important that he always accomplished what he could with his abilities, but Clifman also managed to accomplish the impossible.

In the battlefield where even those far stronger than himself perished, Clifman would somehow resolve the situation and return.

Everyone agreed that among the Royal Class, Clifman had an extraordinary talent.

Of course, everyone watching Clifman felt the depression and despair that seemed to carry death on his shoulders.

Clifman returned to his quarters, and Heinrich read the remaining letters he had received.

Kono Lint and Erich chatted together, as they had already read all the letters sent to

them.

"What should I name the kid?"

“…What nonsense are you talking about?"

"No, there's a girl who sends me letters every month. She must like me. I don't remember her face, but she must be a girl."

“…What do you expect me to say?"

"Should I say, 'Let's meet after the war'? If I reply, 'Let's meet,' she'll agree, right?"

"She might agree… But why don't you change?"

"People die when they change carelessly."

Kono Lint still had some of his old habits.

Heinrich chuckled as he read the letters, overhearing their conversation.

Wasn't it a good thing in this situation that they still had their immature, old selves?

Before he knew it, Heinrich had only one letter left.

It was a strange letter.

Most letters had the sender's name on them, usually names that Heinrich couldn't remember.

The recipient was Heinrich von Schwartz.

But the sender:

[From a friend.]

It simply said, "friend."

Heinrich didn't have any friends outside the garrison.

Puzzled, Heinrich tore open the envelope.

Curious about the contents, he thought it was sent by someone claiming to be his friend.

But upon reading it, Heinrich's eyes widened.

It wasn't a message of gratitude for the rescue.

Nor did it explain who the friend was.

[Your siblings will kill you.]

The letter contained only that single line.

CHAPTER 524

Heinrich fell silent before the short letter claiming his brothers would kill him.

He wondered if it was a misdelivered letter, so Heinrich checked the envelope once again.

From a friend, to Heinrich von Schwarz.

Therefore, it couldn't be a misdelivered letter.

"What's the matter? What does it say that has you looking like that?" Kono Lint, noticing Heinrich's hardened expression, asked.

Should he tell him?

That a strange letter had arrived.

But Heinrich folded the letter and tucked it away.

"Ah, no. It's nothing important."

“…Really?"

There was no need to mention it if this letter was someone's malicious prank.

If this letter was indeed sent to warn him of danger, then knowing it alone would be dangerous enough, so there was no need to share it.

"I should go now. I need some rest."

Heinrich gathered the letters, feeling his mood had dampened.

With a rigid expression, he walked through the garrison and returned to his quarters.

After organizing the letters, Heinrich closed the entrance to his quarters, sat in a

chair, and stared intently at the letter from an unidentified sender.

It wasn't a misdelivered letter.

And he didn't have any friends who would send such a letter.

It wasn't impossible for it to be a mere prank, as anyone could send a letter to Heinrich.

It was a simple sentence without any proper context, saying his brothers would kill him.

He couldn't believe such a thing.

It would be foolish to believe it.

But still…

"Once this situation is resolved, do you plan to return to Kernstadt?"

If his brothers had started to see him not as a brother but as a rival…

Could it really be impossible for such a thing to happen?

He could dismiss it as a malicious joke, or actually believe it should be that way.

But this letter had presented Heinrich with a possibility he had never considered.

There was no naive belief that his talented younger self would be welcomed back into the family.

However, Heinrich had merely thought that if so, his brothers were trying to use him for their own benefit, using his influence and the influence it would have on the high command.

That was how he had understood it.

But to go as far as killing him…

"What nonsense…"

It couldn't happen.

This couldn't be true.

Even if his position in this war became much stronger, Heinrich didn't think he could become Kernstadt's successor, nor did he have any intention to.

The current heir to the throne, Louise von Schwarz, was also a powerful Swordmaster, continually establishing accomplishments. It wasn't as if she lacked merits.

Both Heinrich and Louise were simply earning achievements.

Moreover, they were in the midst of a war.

This very important war hadn't ended yet, so even if his brothers truly intended to kill him, they wouldn't attempt it now.

Whether this letter was true or not, it would be a matter for after the war.

It had to be that way.

Would it make sense to kill him, one of the powerful forces of the allied army, simply because he posed a threat to the throne at this moment? How dangerous and foolish that would be.

He might not know much about politics or his brothers, but rationally speaking, it was something that should never happen.

Not before overcoming the crisis at hand.

Wouldn't it be foolish to make a choice for the next crisis after that?

However, even in this situation, unnecessary politics and power struggles were taking place.

Heinrich knew people could be foolish.

Even within the army that marched with great purpose, he had seen and experienced the foolish actions of those who looked only a step ahead or too far into the distance.

But still.

His brothers.

His brothers wouldn't.

They wouldn't try to kill him, would they?

That shouldn't be possible.

"Yes, they wouldn't do that…"

Heinrich burned the letter in his hand that had only brought him unnecessary confusion.

He watched the remnants of the letter turn to black ash and scatter with a stern expression on his face.

It was nighttime when everyone had gone to sleep, and it was time for Ellen, who had no night operations, to sleep as well.

For some reason, she had been carrying a cat that seemed to like her for quite some time, and eventually brought it into the barracks.

She had initially intended to return it to the dining hall where it had originally been.

"Since it's a kitten, wouldn't it be nice to stay with it? After all, it's been abandoned…"

Because of Adelia's words, Ellen had hesitated for a while before finally bringing the cat to the barracks.

The cat seemed to struggle for a moment but eventually, as if being pulled in, it entered Ellen's barracks without leaving her arms.

Somehow, her blurred consciousness and heart seemed to have found a bit of stability.

As she removed her ceremonial armor, the cat watched quietly as the armor hung on

its stand.

Was it thanks to encountering this strange, small creature that had no business being here?

Ellen found it curious that her hazy consciousness was restored just by the presence of a single cat.

It felt as if she had been caught in an unknown spell.

Anyway, Ellen now thought about washing herself.

She stared at the cat.

She couldn't tell where or how it had come from.

It wasn't particularly dirty, but it was clear that it had been rolling around in the dust of the camp.

Although she had never cared for an animal before, Ellen thought she should wash the cat. The dust couldn't be good for the kitten.

She picked up the cat, which was sitting quietly on the barracks' carpet.

Meow

Holding the softly crying cat, Ellen headed towards the bathroom area of the barracks.

And then, as if it sensed where it was being taken,

Meeeeeow!

"…?"

Meow!

The cat began to struggle in Ellen's arms as if it had an intuition about its fate.

"We need to wash you."

Meow!

"Ah…”

As they entered the bathroom, the cat struggled desperately as if to say it was an absolute no-no, and managed to escape from Ellen's arms.

Ellen watched the cat as it hit the floor and scurried away with its tail between its legs.

Unable to hide properly, the cat was shivering in the corner of the tent with its head buried.

Would it be tormenting the animal to forcibly bathe it when it clearly didn't want to?

Ellen didn't particularly want to hurt the small creature.

"…”

Come to think of it, aren't cats supposed to hate water?

Ellen unbuttoned her shirt, thinking the old saying seemed to be true.

After washing herself in the bathroom, Ellen swiftly picked up the kitten, which was still frightened and hiding in the corner, and placed it on her lap.

While drying her hair with a towel, the kitten sat quietly, shivering.

Was it cold?

Adelia had mentioned that it seemed to be in pain.

Upon closer inspection, its movements were somewhat stiff, as if it were broken.

Unlike the image of a nimble cat, it appeared rather scrawny.

As she dried her hair, the cat slowly got up and stepped down from Ellen's lap, beginning to cry at the entrance of the tent.

Meow

It seemed to be asking for the door to be opened.

Ellen's tent, unlike the others, had a locking mechanism in place.

Thus, neither small animals nor people could easily come and go.

"Do you want to leave…?"

Although it felt strange to speak to an animal, Ellen asked the question.

The cat was said to have been abandoned by its mother, or at least that's what Ellen had heard.

So where could it possibly want to go in the middle of the night? Or maybe it knew a way to return to its mother.

Since she couldn't know what it was thinking, Ellen simply stared intently at the cat.

The black cat stared back at her.

One party remained silent, and the other couldn't speak.

How long did they gaze at each other like that?

The black cat seemed to give up, walking back from the tent entrance toward Ellen, and attempted to jump onto her makeshift bed.

Thud!

Meow!

"!"

However, it seemed unaccustomed to jumping and hit its head on the edge of Ellen's not-so-high makeshift bed before falling off.

"Are you okay…?"

Ellen carefully picked up the pitifully crumpled black cat from the carpet and placed it on her makeshift bed.

A cat that couldn't even jump.

Purr

The cat sat quietly beside Ellen, shivering.

Its appearance seemed almost embarrassed, causing Ellen to stifle a giggle.

Then, she was surprised to realize she had laughed.

Could she laugh at such a trivial matter?

Had she not yet lost her laughter?

Ellen finished drying her hair with the towel and tickled the nape of the trembling, embarrassed cat.

It seemed that the cat had given up on going somewhere and decided to stay in Ellen's tent.

Now that the operation was over, all Ellen had to do was rest.

Proper rest was important. Even if Ellen was strong, the battlefield could snatch her life away in an instant. A restless sleep or inadequate rest would affect her the following day.

The fatigue and flickering consciousness she felt lately were qualitatively different from ordinary tiredness.

Her combat ability was not diminishing, that much was clear.

Even as her consciousness grew dim and her vision blurred, she knew the path her blade must take, and her body moved automatically to strike down her enemies along the optimal route.

The strange feeling of being detached from her own consciousness, as if another being was using her body instead, increased.

For this reason, Ellen felt as if her body had been hijacked by someone, and that someone was wielding her body on her behalf.

For this reason, even though she felt suffocated by fatigue and pressure, her combat ability was not diminishing but rather being strangely elevated.

Turning off the lights and lying down on her makeshift bed, Ellen quietly watched the black cat curled up in front of her face.

The golden eyes of the black cat, and the pupils within, grew larger as they stared back at her in the darkness.

They were very close.

If it had been a person, they would have been close enough to see their own reflections in each other's eyes.

Ellen had never raised an animal before.

Even in her hometown of Rezaira, there were a few houses with dogs, but none with cats.

In Rezaira, animals were generally referred to as prey.

She had never thought about wanting to raise one.

It wasn't that she had never seen a cat before, but this was the first time she had seen one up close like this.

However, today, Ellen reached out to a cat she had never seen before, one that seemed out of place in such a location.

As if it knew something, the cat licked her fingers.

The unfamiliar sensation.

A strangely familiar feeling seemed to awaken something that Ellen was losing.

Before she knew it, she had brought the unfamiliar cat back to her tent, and now it was staring at her from beside her bed.

The cat continued to watch her from the shadows.

Golden eyes.

Eyes that somehow seemed familiar.

For that reason, Ellen felt as though the small animal, which knew nothing, understood her.

Ellen found herself amused at the thought.

"Now I understand why people keep pets… or so it seems."

-…

It's not that they keep them despite not being able to speak.

It's because they can't speak that they keep them.

Because they can project any emotion and feel understood.

Because they can delude themselves into believing they are understood even when they know nothing.

In the moment Ellen felt understood by the cat's eyes, she realized that it was her own desire for understanding that was projected onto it.

The black cat gently rubbed its head against Ellen's face.

It seemed to really understand, even though it was just a delusion that she was being understood.

Ellen gently stroked the cat's head with her hand resting on its back.

It was surprising how such a small being could help her hold onto her fading consciousness.

Her fatigue, the pressure, and the despair seemed to have diminished somewhat.

And so, her mind was now quite clear. Of course, due to fatigue, Ellen's consciousness was gradually sinking into the depths of sleep.

She managed to pull herself together today with the help of that small being, but how long could it last?

She could only receive a small amount of help from such a small existence.

Eventually, it would disappear.

"I don't want… to disappear…”

As Ellen's eyes grew heavy with sleep, she gazed at the cat.

In her fading consciousness.

For some reason, Ellen thought she saw tears well up in the small cat's eyes.

Could cats cry?

Ellen found the thought amusing.

Since when were tears exclusive to humans?

Humans can cry, and humans are ultimately beasts.

Tears must belong to all beasts, not just humans.

So, naturally, cats should be able to cry as well.

However, Ellen didn't know why the cat was crying.

The cat was crying when it should be the person crying.

"Don't… cry…”

Within her fading consciousness, Ellen gently wiped away the tears streaming from the kitten's eyes.

As for being a heavy sleeper or not, Ellen tended to sleep a lot.

Back in her beloved hometown, Ellen was always the child who woke up late, whether she fell asleep early or late.

Nobody scolded her for oversleeping, not her mother, father, or brother.

The little girl who woke up late became the young woman who woke up late.

But it was in the temple that Ellen realized she was a creature of habit.

She could wake up much earlier than her usual bedtime to do morning exercises.

After growing up, she learned that if necessary, she could reduce her sleep and sleep less in situations that required it.

In the temple, she voluntarily reduced her sleep, and now as part of the military, she reduced her sleep out of necessity.

And that wasn't unique to Ellen. Everyone had to start their day early.

As the days grew shorter, Ellen awoke in the dark hours of dawn, needing to head to the command center to receive her mission orders.

Having made the necessary preparations, Ellen donned her inner armor.

Clank! Clank! Clank!

As the armor stand activated, Ellen's ceremonial armor clung to her body, and the seams fit together automatically.

The divine sword of the moon god hung at her waist, and the sun god's cape draped over her shoulders.

Though there were no significant missions for the time being, Ellen was in charge of a constant campaign, always ensuring the safety of the march to the garrison, and eliminating any monsters that appeared.

After receiving her assignment and mission orders at the command center, she set out for the field.

Camping was exceedingly dangerous, so missions were generally completed within a day, but occasionally, they took several days.

Meow

"You must've been disturbed by the noise…"

Ellen watched the black cat, who had seemingly been awakened by the sound of her donning armor, rubbing its eyes and yawning on the bed.

The black cat stared wide-eyed at Ellen, who was now fully armed.

Ellen, clad in her resplendent armor, crouched down in front of the half-awake cat.

Then she gently tickled the cat's neck with her index finger.

"…Unpleasant, isn't it?"

Ellen wondered if the sensation of metal from her gauntlet-covered hand would harm the cat, so she carefully withdrew her hand.

"I have to go."

In just a day, Ellen had grown accustomed to speaking with the cat.

The cat seemed to understand her words and hopped off the bed to land beside Ellen.

Thump!

"…"

The cat, seemingly unaccustomed to jumping, failed to land properly even from the small bed and collapsed onto the ground.

How could it be so clumsy?

Despite its awkwardness, the cat quickly got back on its feet and meowed at the entrance to the tent.

Could it really understand her words?

Ellen couldn't help but have such strange thoughts.

When she unlocked and opened the tent, she saw people who had already started their morning routine, bustling about.

Ellen wasn't the only one who woke up early.

The black cat that emerged from the tent with her meowed by her side.

Meow

As if Ellen was going somewhere, the cat seemed to want to go somewhere too.

As if she could understand the cat's words, Ellen felt as though she could understand what the cat wanted to do.

It was an odd sensation she'd never felt before in her life.

Were cats always such free-spirited animals?

Ellen didn't know much about that aspect.

But like Ellen, the cat seemed to want to go somewhere, even though it didn't appear to be able to run properly.

Whatever it was, she couldn't force it. She didn't have the confidence to take proper care of it anyway.

Ellen looked down at the cat, who gazed up at her, and spoke softly.

"Come back again."

Meow

As if responding to her words, the cat cautiously began to walk away.

Ellen had said she was leaving, but the cat went first.

Even though she'd asked it to return, would it really come back?

That was something she couldn't know.

Even if it was only for a day, having a strange encounter with an unfamiliar cat in her life wasn't a bad thing. It was quite an extraordinary experience.

But if the black cat were to visit her again, that wouldn't be a bad thing either.

With that thought in mind, Ellen walked away.

CHAPTER 525

Late afternoon. The designated meeting place.

"…?"

At a hidden location on the outskirts of the garrison, Harriet could see a black cat approaching from afar.

“…A cat?"

As the cat came closer, it gradually grew larger, eventually taking on the familiar shape of a person. Harriet's jaw dropped.

"Reinhardt?"

"…”

In just a single day, something had happened that left Reinhardt looking quite disheveled.

"What's going on? You can transform into a cat? Since when?"

Harriet couldn't help but be taken aback when a random cat appeared out of nowhere, only to transform into Reinhardt.

"First… let's head back to Edina. I'll explain everything there."

Reinhardt, his mouth tightly closed, seemed to have a lot he couldn't say.

Edina, the capital city of Lazak.

“…Ah, so you couldn't enter the Royal Class garrison in human form, so you transformed into a cat?"

"Yes! But then, Sarkegaar just left me there and escaped!"

He tried to teach me various things for a few hours, but when I couldn't grasp anything, he abandoned me at the garrison and fled!

He said that as long as I got into the garrison, it would be fine, and that being cute would somehow work out.

He claimed that if I was stealthy, I could manage to escape on my own!

Sarkegaar… I thought he was a loyal servant.

Did he have some grudge against me?

It would be strange if he didn't, right?

Considering the long history of our troubled relationship, it's actually odd if he didn't hold any resentment.

Is it fortunate that he only did this much?

"Well, my original plan was to transform into a cat, hide here and there, and eavesdrop on conversations, hoping that if I were caught, my cuteness would let me off the hook…"

"But it turned out the opposite?"

"…You could say that."

"…"

In the end, not only did I attract the attention of the entire Royal Class, but I even spent a night in Ellen's tent.

This actually worked out well in the end.

But there were too many memories from the process that I didn't want to recall.

"That bastard Kono Lint…"

"Kono Lint? What about him?"

“…Never mind. It's nothing."

"What is it? What happened?"

I don't even want to think about it!

"Did he torture animals or something?"

"No, it's not that…”

"Then why are you angry?"

He did help, in a way.

I know he tried to take care of me in various ways!

If it weren't for him, I might have turned into a lily!

"No, I just really don't want to talk about it…”

“…It seems like something did happen."

Though I experienced a series of unexpected events, I couldn't help but consider the outcome as positive.

I was able to closely observe the demeanor of the Royal Class members, not out of curiosity, but because I was right in front of them.

I even got to examine Ellen, who I wanted to scrutinize the most, from up close.

I also checked on how Adriana was doing.

Ellen is a demigod.

Whether it's because of that or not, Ellen was clearly coping better than I was.

The spirits tried to kill me, but they might not have had a reason to kill Ellen.

Although I can't tell how long it will last, it was clear that Ellen was doing better than me.

But maybe I should be even more afraid that Ellen, who is a demigod, is gradually being consumed by it.

Sarkegaar remained stationed at the garrison, gathering information while I was the only one who had returned for now.

"By the way, what about the other units?"

"They must still be in operation, considering we finished too early."

"True."

Thanks to Liana summoning a blizzard that turned the area into a deadly frozen wasteland, our operation ended swiftly.

Other units led by the Vampire Lords were still in action.

When the allied forces resumed their march, we would start our work once again.

I checked the situation at the garrison as well.

"What about Heinrich?"

And at this point, a matter as important as Ellen's situation.

"I sent a letter through Sarkegaar, but…"

Although I warned them, the future remained uncertain.

Of course, I knew that letters were being delivered throughout the Royal Class garrison. So, it was no big deal to include one more letter through Sarkegaar.

However, I didn't think it would entirely resolve the issue.

"Will a single letter… be enough?"

Harriet looked at me anxiously.

"We could meet in person and talk… for sure."

"Yeah, so wouldn't it be better to discuss things more thoroughly?"

I wholeheartedly agreed with Harriet's opinion.

In fact, although it was an incident I didn't want to remember, Harriet had a similar conversation with Ellen.

"The source of information is important."

"…"

"Where's the guarantee that Heinrich will blindly believe what I say? They might think I'm trying to disrupt the allied forces."

Only a handful of people knew the truth about the Gate incident. So, very few would trust the sincerity of my words, and Heinrich wasn't one of them.

Contacting Bertus would be dangerous for him, not me, and I could no longer get in touch with Ellen.

At best, I could only encounter her as a cat, as I did this time.

It was a painful task, nonetheless.

And she asked me to come again.

I never expected it to turn out this way, but would it be good for Ellen if I visited her regularly? Is there any meaning in me visiting her as a cat?

There might be some meaning, but it didn't seem significant.

The situation had become so strange that I began to worry if Ellen would feel neglected if I didn't visit.

Sarkegaar, you were too irresponsible.

When I return, really…

Really…

I can't say anything because of my numerous sins.

It's now impossible to complain about Sarkegaar because I had received the most hospitality so far.

In fact, my information gathering was more successful than necessary.

Anyway.

It's best to avoid secret talks with someone from the allied forces in the name of Darkland.

"There must have been more than one or two guys among our peers at the temple who wanted to kill you out of resentment. That includes you, Olivia, and Liana."

Even if they forgive the cat, they won't forgive me. That's only natural.

It's not just because this situation happened because of me.

Most of the students lost their homes and families.

Unless they were from the Imperial Capital, many of them experienced such incidents.

So, to them, I would be an absolute enemy.

And as a kitten, I listened carefully to the conversations among the students while in the cafeteria.

Of course, most of them talked only about the cat, but I also heard stories beyond that.

Hatred for me

There were many who didn't care at all about kittens or such, being entirely swallowed up by it.

Ludwig was a prime example.

Something had drastically changed since the death of Asher.

In Cliffman's case, it was impossible to know what he was thinking, but the once shy and reticent Cliffman had become less talkative in a different sense.

Whenever the topic of the Demon King arose, the atmosphere would become heavy.

This was felt even amidst the warmth of the kitten's arrival.

Hearing something and seeing it with one's own eyes are indeed different.

I experienced this firsthand, seeing the atmosphere of the royal class through the eyes of the cat.

There are many who will never forgive me.

Would knowing the details change anything?

What if people find out that Ellen, Charlotte, Bertus, and the responsibility of the Imperial Family are involved?

People will hate Ellen, the Empire, and me together.

Then, it would only be the beginning of an era of unending hatred until everything is destroyed.

Heinrich didn't lose his family, but he's among those people.

So, if my people or I were to tell him the truth, he'd be more likely to doubt us first.

Therefore, it's better to remain anonymous.

If he knew the source of the information was me, Heinrich might be less likely to believe me.

If they find out the truth about the Gate incident, it could be an even bigger problem.

They would know that the responsibility for the underlying cause of the Gate

incident lies with the Imperial Royal Family, including me, and that we've been hiding it until now.

It's better not to know the truth.

Because knowing it would inevitably lead to divisions within the alliance.

"But… how can you be so sure it'll happen that way?"

At Harriet's question, I stared out the window quietly.

I know the future.

But that no longer has any meaning. Because now, I don't know the future.

Except for the 'future' I saw in the preview.

"Sometimes, things that happen between people can be painfully obvious."

People remain the same, and the dynamics of power remain the same. And then they begin to change.

The events scheduled to unfold in the changing landscape will proceed accordingly.

Harriet seemed puzzled by my words.

Heinrich von Schwarz is a forsaken prince.

As a child, he awakened his abilities and accidentally killed his siblings.

That's why he was driven out to the Temple.

So, at the beginning of my time at the Temple, I didn't fear any repercussions when I defeated Heinrich. I knew the Kernstadt royal family had no interest in him.

"Still, I can't predict everything… and this isn't my area of expertise, anyway…"

I merely know the characters and events I've created, not predicting the complex dynamics of politics.

So, for dealing with what comes after this, I'll need to consult an expert.

As always, there's the possibility that there's something else I don't know.

There's no guarantee that there are no hidden events in this case, too.

Charlotte would tell me what else I need to do or learn here.

"But you know…"

"Huh?"

Harriet's face reddened as she looked at me.

"I want to see it too."

"What? What do you want to see?"

"I didn't get a good look earlier."

Ah.

I think I know what she's talking about.

"Well… Why would you want to see that, of all things?"

"It's just so fascinating, isn't it? Huh? Can you do it?"

Harriet, brimming with excitement, approached me and eagerly asked.

Seriously, what's the big deal about a cat?

In reality, I don't like cats that much.

There's no reason to like the cats that make strange noises all over the neighborhood when they're in heat. Of course, I've never raised one.

I chose it simply because it's easier to hide than a dog and wouldn't need a leash. And kittens are usually cute, so that's why I went with it.

But when the people from the royal class garrison came to see me, I couldn't help but wonder why they were all so amazed and excited about it!

It does seem cute, though.

But is it really worth all this fuss? Even if we are in the midst of a desolate and miserable battlefield?

That's how it was.

I never even expected Ellen to show that much interest in it!

I don't like turning into a cat!

I still don't know the controls well, so I'm not sure what to do either!

I've managed to walk and run, but I still haven't gotten the hang of anything more than that.

"Uh, do it! Do it! Please, huh?"

This.

Isn't she going to cry if I don't do it?

But why does she want to see it so badly?

Seeing Harriet this excited was so unusual that I felt awkward.

“…No."

I couldn't refuse her when there wasn't much difference with the other options and Harriet was acting like this.

"How did it come to this…?"

In the end, I gave in.

I couldn't bring myself to look away from Harriet's sparkling eyes.

I used Sarkegaar's ring again.

After a short while, Harriet looked down at me, now transformed into a small black cat.

Uh.

But.

Now that I'm smaller, the.

The angle is that.

“…Hey! You!"

Harriet hastily covered her skirt.

-Meow!

No!

You're the one who asked me to transform!

I didn't know this would happen! It's only my second time transforming, so I didn't think about how things would turn out!

With a flushed face, Harriet stepped back and then kneeled down to look at me.

"Wow, wow…”

Harriet approached me with a wobbly gait and swiftly picked up my cat form.

-Meow!

"Ah! Cute, so cute!"

Harriet hugged me tightly.

As expected, she has quite the reaction.

"I love you!"

-Meow!

My waist is breaking!

Edina's scribe, Harriet de Saint-Owan, suddenly began wandering around the castle, hugging a cat.

"Scribe? Are you raising a cat?"

"Yes! Isn't it cute?"

"Ah, yes… It's, it's cute…"

Harriet, holding a black cat with a somewhat sour expression, shoved it in people's faces, constantly exclaiming how cute it was.

Hugging a cat that somehow seemed forcibly cuddled, Harriet proudly showed it off to everyone.

Everyone quite liked seeing the always mature and serious scribe smiling like a person her age.

There were many who feared the Demon King, but it was clear that the scribe had a good impression on everyone.

As she wandered around the castle, it was only natural for her to run into various people.

"…What's this? Why do you have a cat?"

Olivia Lanze, who had come to the castle to talk with the regent, was no exception.

"Isn't it cute?"

"…Cute? What's with the cat's sour expression? Besides, I don't like cats. They're so rude, acting like animals."

"Heh…”

At Olivia's words, Harriet wore a sly smile. Seeing Harriet's enigmatic grin, Olivia furrowed her brows.

"Ha, seems like you're trying to charm me with a cat. But you were disqualified the moment you couldn't seduce Reinhardt despite sharing a bedroom with him for over six months."

"Heh, hehe… Is that so?"

As Harriet's gaze seemed to ridicule her, Olivia's expression froze.

A dreadful suspicion arose in her mind.

"What? You couldn't possibly…?"

"Well, I don't know about that, but watch."

Harriet suddenly lifted the cat and pressed her lips to its mouth.

-Meow!

"Cute, right?"

“…What a show-off."

And then, Olivia saw it.

The cat transformed from Harriet's hands into a human in the blink of an eye.

"Hey! What are you doing?!"

Reinhardt, with a flushed face, covered his mouth, spluttering.

"????"

"What! I wanted to kiss my cat!"

"Why am I your cat?!"

"What… What… What's happening? What's going on here?"

Olivia gaped, watching the scene of the transformed cat acting indignant.

"You… You damned little brat!"

Olivia shouted in anger, and Harriet cackled as she hurried away.

"I prefer dogs, too!"

"What are you talking about, both of you!"

This time, Olivia made a plea that wasn't a plea for Reinhardt to transform into a puppy.

Reinhardt tried to surprise Olivia by transforming into a wolf-sized dog, but Olivia ended up loving it even more, saying the bigger, the better.

CHAPTER 526

The Lazak Royal Castle was filled with an unexpected argument between the scribe and the head priest of the Holy Order.

“It's a dog!”

“It's a cat, okay?”

“Dog! A dog! Dogs are great!”

“I said it's a cat! Do you really not know?”

Naturally, Liana de Grantz, the Thunder King, had nothing else to do before her next deployment, so she had no choice but to watch this bizarre quarrel.

Cats or dogs?

What a strange conversation to have in a place like this.

“Hey! I'm not doing anything, so why do you two keep fighting and dragging me into it?!”

Reinhardt, who was in between the two, seemed ready to grab their collars as his face turned pale.

He had just returned from scouting the allied army's garrison.

“…What are you guys doing?"

Liana approached and asked the flushed-faced Olivia and Harriet.

"Liana! What do you think?"

"Think about what?"

Liana tilted her head at Harriet's question.

Olivia answered.

"Ha, she'll think the same. Obviously, it's a dog. Dogs are better. She'll agree, right?"

"It's a cat, I tell you!"

Harriet exclaimed with a grin.

Olivia and Harriet both stared intently at Liana.

Reinhardt tried to ignore the situation, not wanting to hear any more about it.

Dog or cat.

Liana's dilemma didn't last long.

"Well, maybe dogs are more edible?"

"!"

"Wh-what?!"

At her brief answer, Olivia gaped, and Harriet was aghast.

Reinhardt, too, tried to ignore the situation but couldn't help turning blue. Liana shrugged at their reactions.

"Weren't we talking about which one would be better to eat during a food shortage?"

"You're crazy…"

"Li-Liana…"

"…You should stop taking depressants. Your condition is getting weirder."

Liana started giggling at the horrified reactions of the three.

"Of course, I'm joking."

Liana's taste for humor was deteriorating.

"You transformed into a cat?"

“…Yeah."

After hearing the details, Liana crossed her arms and fell into thought for a moment.

Reinhardt had transformed into a baby black cat.

He had returned after receiving a lot of affection at the Royal Class garrison.

"You've gone up a notch."

Liana pretended to feel sick, as if she was about to vomit.

"I didn't want to do it!"

"Then did someone force you?"

"No, not that… but! That's not the point! The original plan was… never mind. There's no point in explaining."

"So Olivia thinks dogs are better, and Harriet thinks cats are better, and that's why they were fighting?"

"Yep. Obviously, it's a cat."

"No wonder you like a creature that doesn't even know loyalty. You're just like the animal you admire."

"Ah… so you're saying you’re a bitch… right?"

As Harriet laughed while covering her mouth, Olivia's face turned bright red.

"What?! Bitch… You've said enough!"

"You said it yourself!"

"Stop it! Both of you! It's my fault for transforming into a beast! Can you please just

stop?"

Reinhardt couldn't bear to watch their bickering anymore and shouted, his face flushed.

"Hmph!"

"Tsk!"

Both turned their heads away, clearly not wanting to look at each other.

"Dogs or cats…"

Liana began to ponder, crossing her arms as if she was troubled.

"Actually, dogs and cats are too common."

"…I chose it because it's common."

"I want to try raising a reptile."

"…?"

"How about a snake? If not a snake, then a lizard."

"What do you want me to do about it?"

"But you've had cats and dogs! Why can't you have a snake?"

"That's why I said no!"

Reinhardt firmly refused in the end.

"Ha, while pretending not to be interested, you never plan on changing when it comes to not receiving cuteness. You devious creature."

"It's not like that!"

Finally, Reinhardt exploded.

Having been tormented all day by Liana, Harriet, and Olivia, he couldn’t visit Charlotte until late at night.

The debate between dogs and cats is age-old, but Liana suddenly wanted to see a reptile and made a bizarre request.

Of course, since Liana appeared, there had been no transformations.

If it's shown too often, it becomes a habit.

However…

To be honest.

'Here we go again.'

Somehow, it felt like it would be necessary to transform into a cat and visit the allied forces' base.

Although it was unclear, it seemed like the cat played a role similar to a nerve-calming agent for Ellen.

If that's the case, wouldn't the time spent in animal form become greater than in human form if it's shown to others out of guilt for only showing it to Ellen?

What is this?

It wasn't about finding dignity as a king, but what is this pet-type demon king who can transform into any animal?

It's horrifying.

I've dug my own grave again.

In the end, it was after sunset that Charlotte could be visited.

Charlotte, who was in charge of Edina's rule, was incredibly busy.

She was stuck in her office until midnight.

"Ah, Reinhardt. I heard you returned."

Wearing a black dress, Charlotte stood up from her seat and smoothed her clothes as I knocked on the office door.

Strictly speaking, there was a hierarchical relationship, but acting too much like that was, well… a bit…

Strange.

Anyway, she didn't hear about my animal transformation, did she?

"Are you busy?"

At my words, Charlotte shook her head.

"Not really. I've finished my work today, but there are some things I need to think about."

It's fortunate that she didn't seem to have heard.

I wouldn't have been able to refuse if Charlotte also asked me to show her.

Since she had finished her work, she looked at me quietly, as if asking me to state my business.

Black hair and devilish eyes.

Honestly.

The appearance of a demon comes to mind, but…

It's not as cute and lovely as before.

Now, she emits an atmosphere similar to a queen rather than a princess.

Seeing it repeatedly, this appearance of Charlotte isn't too bad.

It's somewhat…

Strange…

Well.

"I have something I need to discuss."

"Discuss?"

At that, Charlotte tilted her head, as if asking what I could possibly have to discuss with her.

And then.

-Gurgle

The sound came not from my stomach, but from Charlotte's.

She said she finished her work, but did she not eat?

“…You should eat while you work."

"Th-that's true…”

Charlotte's face turned red, and she vigorously nodded her head, looking sorry.

"It's not a secret, so let's talk while eating."

"Th-that… Um… Yes."

Charlotte silently followed behind me.

Edina Castle was not initially a lavish or grandiose space.

The structure itself is not a palace, but a castle. It does not have grand banquet halls, court orchestras, or galleries.

Compared to the imperial palace, Edina Castle is practically a humble dwelling.

"Is it uncomfortable living in a place like this? Did I ask you too late?"

As I walked alongside Charlotte, she vigorously shook her head with a dismayed expression when I asked her.

"No, no, really. It's fine, really. Don't worry about it. You know I don't care about such things…"

Her words trailed off, and I couldn't help but notice Charlotte's expression die.

Ever since being kidnapped by the demon king, Charlotte became indifferent to not only food but also sleep.

Unknowingly, and without either of us realizing it, we touched upon each other's vulnerabilities, and Charlotte fell silent.

After my true identity was revealed, I couldn't properly converse with Charlotte.

Why did I have to do it? Why did it have to happen? Charlotte never heard my story, and it was not a situation where I could explain it to her either.

But with only the truth that I genuinely wanted to prevent this situation, we spent the past two years unable to share any conversations.

It was the same now.

Charlotte felt guilty towards me, and we only apologized for it, but we never revisited everything that happened since our first encounter.

Why did I deceive her?

Did I deceive her from the beginning, knowing she was a princess?

About the truth of her abduction.

About the days of exchanging letters.

It occurred to me that we still haven't talked about anything.

In the face of major events like the Gate Incident, matters that determine the fate of

the world, managing a single country – are these small conversations supposed to be buried?

Do we not need to have those conversations? Since Charlotte buried her questions in guilt, do we not need to talk about them?

I walked in silence with Charlotte, head down, towards the dining hall.

Let's eat something first.

We'll talk while eating.

No matter what.

"You want to… do it yourself?"

As I intended to enter the kitchen myself instead of calling someone, Charlotte looked at me with an incredulous expression.

"There's no rule saying the demon king can't hold a knife, right?"

"Well… I suppose…"

I barely recognize myself as a king, and I have no thoughts about the discipline or dignity I should maintain as one.

And, to be honest, after a long time, I wanted to make something with my own hands for Charlotte.

If I were to seriously consider it, although I have a hierarchical relationship with them, I don't know if they regard me as their ruler, but to me, they are merely friends.

I have limitations in doing things alone, so I seek help from my friends.

I'm not sure if it's right to think this way as a king, but my mindset doesn't change from this.

Also, the fact is that after training with swords at the temple, the next thing I've held the most is a kitchen knife.

I've made countless meals and eaten them just as tirelessly.

Before breakfast and after evening training sessions.

Together with Ellen.

Sometimes with Harriet and Charlotte as well.

"…"

I couldn't help but pause when I recalled my days at the temple.

I thought about the things that had changed.

Moments that could never be returned to come to mind.

Even back then, I had thought about it.

That someday, everything would change.

I knew it had to be that way.

Even in those moments, I kept thinking that a day would come when I would reminisce about those times, and those moments could never be eternal.

Those thoughts had ultimately become reality, and I had no choice but to live in the present, unable to return to that moment.

But just because I knew it would happen, and even if I expected it, it wasn't as if I could easily accept it when it truly came to pass.

Moments I couldn't return to.

Relationships I couldn't turn back.

I found it infuriating, unfair.

And, sad.

It was somewhat amusing that the kitchen there couldn't provide the same environment as a kitchen of a mere school operated by the Empire, but the Empire was inherently on a different level.

It wasn't quite the environment of the Temple, but it was still the King's castle.

There were ample food supplies, and since it was late and Charlotte didn't eat much, I made a light sandwich.

A cup of water and a sandwich.

"Thank you, Reinhardt."

"It's nothing."

"Still…"

Despite it being nothing special, Charlotte seemed touched, her eyes shining as she began to eat the sandwich.

Since I made one for myself too, I ate a sandwich as well.

"When do you think we'll set out next?"

"Well… That depends on the movements of the Allied Forces, not on my will. We'll have to keep a close eye on their actions."

"Right, I suppose so."

The decision of the Allied Forces' advance wasn't up to me. Therefore, due to the nature of our work, which required us to follow the movements of the Allied Forces, we couldn't know when our next departure would be.

When the Allied Forces advanced and dispatched their vanguard to secure the route, we would strike a more advanced position.

"It's fortunate that nothing's happened. The other units should also be without incident."

"Probably. We've all agreed that if our strength is insufficient, we'll retreat immediately. There's no need to push ourselves."

The number of personnel deployed was small, so the loss of personnel would be devastating. As long as the Vampire Lords followed instructions, there shouldn't be any major problems.

Maximize restraint in engagements with the Allied Forces.

Retreat immediately if personnel loss is expected during a battle.

As long as these two principles were adhered to, there should be no major issues for the other units either.

On reflection, there was something I needed to tell Charlotte.

It wasn't crucial information for Charlotte, but still.

"By the way, we destroyed a Gate. It was a small one, though."

"I heard about that from Harriet. But I'm worried that destroying a Warp Gate is a bit reckless…"

"We didn't push ourselves. To be precise, it was pretty much all done by that girl Liana."

Although we were a mere five-person squad, excluding Liana, the four of us didn't even have a chance to exert ourselves.

She summoned a massive blizzard, turning the area into a virtual snowfield. Flying monsters crashed, a considerable number of creatures froze to death, and the remaining monsters either suffocated or were crushed under the snow.

"Still, it's best not to rely too much on that method. We can't know how long it'll work."

Charlotte, who had already received a report from Harriet, nodded quietly.

"You're right. But I think this will be a pretty important card for our strategy moving forward."

"Yeah, I guess so."

It was a strategy to reduce the number of monsters by exposing them to extreme cold, and once we tried it, we realized it had considerable side effects.

As I said, monsters are diverse. If we want to kill them with the environment rather than direct attacks, we need to employ various methods.

There are creatures similar to ordinary living beings, but there are also entirely different ones.

That's why, various types of death were required.

Death by poison and falling.

As I was considering those, I could also see the effects of suffocation and being crushed.

I confirmed that a blizzard could be quite a versatile weapon.

Of course, the fact that there were monsters that survived in such extreme conditions could be seen as even more horrifying.

"With just us, we should be able to advance by dealing with small gates like this. I'm not sure about medium or large gates, and we certainly can't handle super-large ones on our own."

While a blizzard is a very useful weapon at the moment, there will come a time when it will not work against certain enemies.

"When the allied forces arrive, they'll be quite bewildered…"

"It doesn't seem like the snow will melt by the time they arrive, but, well, we'll figure something out."

With Heinrich present, a bit of fire magic would make the snow melt quickly.

If that doesn't work, Liana can step in again.

Technically, it would cause large-scale environmental destruction, but it's not like I care about nature. My priorities lie elsewhere.

After finishing her sandwich, Charlotte gazed at me absentmindedly.

Right, we agreed to discuss something.

Somehow, sitting together like this, eating something we made late at night, I feel like just chatting about various things.

Perhaps I should say that it makes me feel sentimental.

Even though I know this is not the time for it, it's been so long since I've felt sentimental that it feels rather strange.

Still, I must do what needs to be done.

I don't know everything.

And there's a lot I can't do.

That's why there are many people around me.

People who can think about what I don't know, and people who can do what I can't.

They are all precious to me.

"Do you know about the Schwarz royal family?"

"Are you talking about Kernstadt?"

"Yeah, that's right."

Charlotte tilted her head, as if she didn't understand why I was asking.

"I know as much as I need to know."

It's not some minor country; it's the second-ranked human nation.

In other words, number two among the human countries.

That's why Charlotte knows as much as she needs to.

That phrase was quite interesting.

Not "I know as much as I do," but "I know as much as I need to."

It means that she knows not just the commonly known knowledge, but also the knowledge a princess must possess.

In other words, she has knowledge about the undisclosed details as well.

"You know Heinrich, right?"

"Yes, Heinrich von Schwarz. He was our classmate. I know that he's been quite active since the Gate incident."

"I think he's likely to be assassinated by his own siblings soon."

“…What? Assassinated?"

It was natural for Charlotte to react with disbelief.

CHAPTER 527

Upon hearing the rumor that Heinrich von Schwarz would soon be assassinated, Charlotte wore an expression of disbelief.

"No, I know it's unbelievable, but what if it does happen?"

"It's all my fault, really!"

"Assume for now that it happens, and tell me about it."

"Alright."

The problem.

One day, Heinrich takes on a mission as usual, but he is killed during the assignment. Instead of an assassination, his death is disguised as having been caused by monsters.

At that point in the original story, Heinrich was still an unlucky fellow, but his position had become crucial. As a result, not only would the Allied Forces be severely shocked, but the Royal Class would also be shaken.

Ludwig watches Heinrich's funeral, which is held at an alarmingly fast pace by the Kernstadt royal family, and realizes that something is amiss.

Ludwig reports this to Bertus, who grants him permission to investigate the matter discreetly.

While the Allied Forces mourn Heinrich's passing, Ludwig, with the help of several others, uncovers that the Kernstadt royal family is behind the incident.

Following the incident, Bertus, furious that such an event could occur due to petty political games, executes the entire Kernstadt royal family and forcefully integrates the command structure under the empire.

At the time of the original story, Bertus acted as the regent for the deceased Emperor

Nelliod de Gardias, taking on the role of supreme commander of the Allied Forces. However, since Bertus is now the Emperor, he cannot leave his post, and so he must travel between the Imperial Capital and the Allied Forces' base.

Anyway, after this, an immense backlash occurs within the Kernstadt army, and some even attempt to desert.

In this situation, Ludwig passionately appeals to the Kernstadt army not to abandon the war that determines the fate of humanity.

In the original story, Ludwig is a symbolic figure because he possesses the Alsbringer, a powerful artifact.

As a result, the Kernstadt army continues to serve the Allied Forces, following Ludwig's appeal.

If left alone, Heinrich will die.

Heinrich is not only a classmate but also a crucial part of the Allied Forces.

The loss of Heinrich causes a rift within the Allied Forces, but they eventually reunite due to Ludwig's persuasion and sense of duty. Nevertheless, tensions continue to exist between the imperial army and the Kernstadt army.

It's a disastrous event with no positive outcomes.

That's why I hope this incident won't happen.

I've warned Heinrich in a letter, but I cannot be sure if it will be effective.

"Assuming Heinrich is assassinated, I want to resolve this situation without him dying and the Allied Forces suffering significant damage. Is that possible?"

Contacting Heinrich directly would likely be a bad idea, as he doesn't trust me.

What if I kill all of Heinrich's royal siblings?

This would cause massive chaos within the command structure.

Moreover, if I were to personally take action, it would be like the Demon King himself

attacking the Allied Forces' base and killing the Kernstadt royals.

Hatred towards me would skyrocket among the Allied Forces, and unease would spread. They'd constantly fear that the Demon King might attack at any moment.

And even if I did kill his family, Heinrich would never forgive me. He wouldn't know that if I hadn't killed them, he would have been the one to die.

If there's no proper way, I could choose to kill all of Heinrich's brothers myself. But I know very well that's neither the best nor the average choice, and it's a terrible one at that.

No matter what I do, their hatred for me would pierce the sky, so even if Heinrich thinks of me as the enemy of his family, would my burden get any heavier? There's no particular need to deliberately shoulder more hatred.

It's possible to disguise my actions as someone else's.

Whether through Sarkegaar or directly, by assassination.

In the end, an assassination would occur within the allied forces, causing a disturbance and slowing the march of the army.

The command structure would be reorganized, and when the allied forces start commanding the Kernstadt army as they used to, problems would arise.

Even if subordinate commanders inherit the command, the confusion won't subside.

It's a problem even if Heinrich, the only heir of Kernstadt, takes over the command. That guy may be strong, but he has no experience or talent in leadership and command.

Ultimately, the three trying to kill Heinrich are people who clearly have their own usefulness.

The three royal members are doing their immediate duties well, causing accidents if left alone.

They are villains who, if removed, cause problems equivalent to the indispensable factors they possess.

Getting rid of them is easy.

However, the problems arising after their removal lead to even more problems.

So, with as little noise as possible.

Passing this incident over entirely in a way that doesn't kill Heinrich or cause significant trouble within the allied forces.

Is that possible?

I sought Charlotte because I couldn't think of anything more here.

"Um… I don't know the situation of the allied forces very well, but… I think I have a rough idea of what you're thinking, Reinhardt…"

Charlotte begins to seriously consider my question.

"Because Heinrich is forced to stand out suddenly, his brothers will be tense… So, they try to eliminate him beforehand to avoid greater consequences… Hmm… It doesn't seem entirely impossible."

Charlotte tilts her head.

"But it's a matter of probability, can we be sure that such a thing will happen?"

There's a possibility, but there's no guarantee it will happen.

"Perhaps if it's an assassination, they'll disguise it as a death on duty… But I wonder if the Schwarzs are really… reckless enough to be that foolish…"

A foolish act.

I couldn't help but agree with Charlotte's words.

The Gate incident hasn't even been resolved yet, and the brothers kill Heinrich, who is a powerful force, just because he is too outstanding.

In the original, Bertus couldn't believe the truth and was beyond furious.

At a time like this.

At a moment like this.

Killing one of the most important forces of the allied army, a brother even, for a mere struggle for the throne.

That's why Bertus loses his sanity and, using his authority as the supreme commander, executes all the Kernstadt royals.

Deciding that it's better to kill them and face some disturbance rather than wage war with such madmen.

In reality, the allied forces are on the verge of division, but they are saved from ruin by Ludwig.

In the end, Charlotte clearly judged this incident as too foolish to happen.

"Right, it might be a possibility. But there's no harm in preventing it if we don't know if it will happen, right? The bleeding of the allied forces is also our bleeding."

"Well, that's true. So let's assume the situation unfolds like that and think about it. Well… If we really consider the possibility of an assassination, by the time this war is properly resolved, Heinrich would be in a position where even the royal family of Kernstadt couldn't easily interfere with him… It doesn't seem entirely impossible."

"Hmm, that's true. He would receive treatment almost on par with that of a hero like Ellen."

While Ellen's status is excessively high, Heinrich is no pushover either.

Frankly, the original protagonist, Ludwig, can't even begin to catch up to the reputation Heinrich has now.

So by the time the Gate crisis ends and humanity's reconstruction truly begins, Heinrich will inevitably be treated as an unparalleled hero not only in Kernstadt but also in every place where humans have survived.

"In that case, even if Heinrich himself doesn't want to be king, he might have to become one."

"Uh… Indeed. That's a possibility."

The darker the era, the stronger the power of symbols.

As the youngest member of the Kernstadt royal family, Heinrich might almost inevitably be pushed onto the throne.

The youngest, who, whether they like it or not, would possess enough influence to become king if he is alive.

Older siblings who, feeling the injustice and resentment of having the succession taken away from them, would try to kill the youngest before he become too famous to be touched.

Charlotte seemed convinced that there was more than enough possibility of that happening.

"In the end, the important thing isn't whether Heinrich's assassination happens or not, but how to prevent that situation if it does happen…"

Charlotte furrowed her brow as she pondered.

"It would be easiest to resolve the matter through Bertus, but if Heinrich were to completely become an imperial figure… In other words, severing all ties with Kernstadt. It would just take convincing Heinrich… Then the situation would be maintained. But this carries a risk."

"Making contact with Bertus is indeed dangerous… But if there's no other way, we have no choice."

"That's not the only issue."

Charlotte shook her head.

"The Schwarz royal family is likely to perceive this as interference in their internal affairs."

"…Even if we're trying to save them, they might take offense and view it as internal interference?"

"Of course."

Charlotte sighed.

"Kernstadt is the Empire's foremost vassal state."

“…Is that so?"

"Don't you remember the Orbis Class?"

"Ah."

The Orbis Class would also be participating in this Gate crisis, and although the class itself has disappeared, the students remain. So the Orbis Class alumni would still be present at the Templar base.

One of the numerous incidents that occurred due to my actions was the collapse of the Orbis Class.

In short, the relationship between the Orbis Class and the Royal Class can be described as one of inferiority.

A perpetual first and second place.

The Empire and Kernstadt have a similar relationship.

"Kernstadt is the nation closest to the Empire, and as a result, Kernstadt harbors tremendous feelings of inferiority not only towards the Empire but also its own citizens. But how much greater would the inferiority complex of the Schwarz royal family be?"

"Ah… I see."

The nation closest to the Empire ultimately has the strongest desire for the Empire.

To be precise, the Schwarz royal family of Kernstadt envies the Gardias imperial family more than anyone else in the world and, due to that, suffers from an inferiority complex.

The Empire had not remained safe and stable up to this point without struggles. It

was just that these conflicts were not recorded in history. There had been countless attempts by the Schwarz family to overthrow the Empire.

Mankind had an enemy.

The Empire was established under that flag.

However, that did not mean there had been no turmoil.

As a princess, Charlotte would be well aware of the many unrecorded power struggles and intrigues that had taken place.

"That's why it's crucial for the Emperor of the Empire to maintain a relationship with Kernstadt that is neither too close nor too distant. Kernstadt is the most important diplomatic target, a potential enemy, and yet, at the same time, the most crucial ally."

For the Empire, Kernstadt was also important, whether in a good or bad sense.

"Leaving aside the fact that our approach to Bertus is dangerous for Bertus, completely excluding Heinrich from the Kernstadt royal family and integrating him as an official of the Empire could be seen as a gesture that the Empire is trying to swallow the Schwarz family. So, of course, they would consider it interference in their internal affairs and resist."

"Shouldn't they be happy if a strong contender for the throne gives up their claim willingly? Even if they hate the Empire."

At my words, Charlotte shook her head.

"Reinhardt, with this approach, the issue isn't just about gestures and possibilities; it actually becomes feasible for Bertus to swallow the Schwarz family through Heinrich."

“…What?"

"Succession rights are just a facade. Even if Heinrich were to give them up, the influence he would wield after the war could still affect the royal succession structure. And if Bertus wanted, he could really make Heinrich the King of Kernstadt. It's an opportunity to completely replace the Schwarz family, which has been a thorn

in their side, with Heinrich as his man. It would be strange if Bertus didn't do it. Why wouldn't he do it when he can?"

“…Hmm."

Kernstadt's perception of interference in their internal affairs is not mistaken.

It is actually interference.

By severing Heinrich's connection with Kernstadt entirely to eliminate the possibility of his assassination, the Empire could use Heinrich to swallow Kernstadt's royal family instead.

Charlotte pondered and shook her head.

"Come to think of it, this method won't work; Heinrich would die because of his situation if that happens."

“…So, it would rather provoke the Kernstadt royal family?"

"Yes, the current heir, Louise von Schwarz, is not a fool. On the contrary, she's quite clever. If the Empire makes such a decision, she would predict what's about to happen in an instant. Then, not only would they try to eliminate Heinrich even faster, but their relationship with the Empire would also be completely ruined."

The solution to deal with assassination creates an even greater possibility for assassination.

Severing the relationship between Heinrich and Kernstadt is actually a more dangerous choice.

If Heinrich remains within Kernstadt's sphere of influence, the royal family, feeling threatened by his growing stature, would likely assassinate him.

If Heinrich remains within the Empire's sphere of influence, the Schwarz family, fearing a future where the Empire swallows them through Heinrich, would assassinate him.

"A fate that can only lead to death… Is that it?"

No matter what is done, Heinrich ends up being assassinated.

Is there no way to avoid Heinrich's assassination through a moderate approach?

"Do we have to kill the people of the Schwarz royal family stationed here, no matter the method?"

“…At least not Louise von Schwarz."

"Why…?"

"Because it would surely lead to greater chaos. Not only is she the supreme commander, but she also has a strong foothold in Kernstadt. What would happen to an army that lost its commander? There's likely no one within the Kernstadt military with better capabilities. But if we kill the others except for Louise von Schwarz and Heinrich, eventually, Louise von Schwarz will try to kill Heinrich anyway, so it would be meaningless."

In the end, Charlotte had the same concerns as I did.

This headache is too painful.

They are both too important.

Both Heinrich and Louise von Schwarz are crucial.

If either of them dies, it would be a problem, and if there's no other way to resolve the issue than death, what should we do?

"Let's bring them in."

“…What?"

For a moment, I didn't understand what Charlotte was saying.

"Heinrich is entangled in too many political schemes within the coalition forces. I think it will be after the war if an assassination happens… But if Heinrich is assassinated during the march, every moment would be dangerous. So, in the end, the only way to protect Heinrich's life is to have him with us."

“…Is that so?"

I had thought of that kind of plan before.

"But there's no guarantee that Heinrich will willingly join us."

"That's true. With everything that has happened so far, it will undoubtedly be difficult for him to accept us, and you."

The likelihood of Heinrich willingly joining my side seems very low.

Force or violence might be the only options.

"Still, the only solution that comes to mind right now… is this one."

Charlotte spoke while finishing her remaining sandwich.

Capturing Heinrich.

We could try, but would Heinrich accept?

To ensure your safety, not to increase our power.

There's no way Heinrich would accept that reason when no assassination attempts have been made.

Let's think about it from my perspective.

If in secret, Bertus approaches, and the core forces of Edina, including Charlotte, try to drive me away, conveying the intention to join the empire.

Would I believe that?

I definitely wouldn't, right?

We'll capture Heinrich.

At the moment, there doesn't seem to be any other way.

After finishing our meal, though late at night, Charlotte and I had a cup of tea on the royal terrace.

I like to climb up the tower and look down at Lazak, but the view from this terrace is just as good.

I don't know about other things, but in my opinion, the view from the palace is better than that from the temple.

We need to think a bit more about how to capture Heinrich.

"The Kernstadt royal family… It doesn't concern me now, but they were quite the notorious bunch."

"From what I've heard, they especially seem to have been so from the Empire's perspective…"

The number one vassal state and the ruler of all vassal states, the Imperial Royal Family.

It made sense when I heard that the Schwarz royal family couldn't help but envy and be jealous of the empire.

They had the potential to become the empire, but the Gardias royal family was too strong.

"Though it may be rude to say this to you… The influence of Darkland played a big role in the Gardias royal family remaining intact and the Schwarz royal family not being able to take down the empire beyond a certain point."

"It must have been like that."

It wasn't exactly the same, but in the past, Bertus had said something similar.

That's why, when I caused a terror incident in the empire to rescue the demon prisoners, Bertus, despite suffering substantial losses, was rather pleased.

He believed that the incident could help prolong the life of the empire.

If I hadn't existed and the Gate Incident hadn't occurred,

There might have been an uprising by the revolutionary forces, or the empire might have been divided under the leadership of Kernstadt.

One enormous event had swallowed up everything in the world and reset it to nothing.

"Do you know there's an academy similar to the Temple in Kernstadt?"

“…Really?"

That was the first time I'd heard of it. Kernstadt must feel inferior to the empire. That's why they couldn't help but envy the Temple, which was a very important project for the empire, nurturing and securing talent.

So, Kernstadt created a system that benchmarked the Temple instead of sending their royal family members there.

"I've heard that the quality of education there is quite good as well… I don't know much about it, but they're quite diligent in trying to catch up with the Temple."

Just as the Royal Class wasn't particularly interested in the Orbis Class, the same was true for the Kernstadt Academy, which was trying to catch up with the Temple in some way.

Why bother, when there's no comparison?

It must have felt like that.

"And that's why it was quite surprising to the empire and the Temple when Heinrich entered the Temple. The royal family of Kernstadt's Schwarz lineage sent a member to the Temple. It must have felt like that."

"Well, that's true."

There had been an accident.

That's why he had been sent to the Temple as if being expelled.

It was the first time I had heard about the backstory of him not being able to enroll in the internal academy of Kernstadt.

I know the circumstances.

But does Charlotte know as well?

"Hmm… Reinhardt, you might not know, and it might be rude to talk about this behind the scenes, but there's an incident that made it almost inevitable for Heinrich to go to the Temple."

“…I have a rough idea."

“…Really?"

Pretending not to know and then acting surprised after hearing it would have been pointless, so I made a gesture that I had a rough idea of what Charlotte was trying to say.

Charlotte didn't specifically ask for the source of the information.

"When he was very young, his abilities awakened, and during that time, his two older brothers died… That's what I heard."

"Ah, it was probably something like that."

"Hmm…”

Charlotte took a sip of her tea.

"Anyway, it was an accident, and it couldn't be helped… Even though Heinrich entered the Temple back in elementary school, which was a very long time ago…”

What is Charlotte trying to say?

"While it's true that the death of the direct royal family members was a very dangerous and significant event, was it really necessary for Heinrich to be almost chased out to the Temple… That's what I'm thinking now."

“…Really?"

"Yes. After all, it was an accident, not intentional. But… if you think about it, he was sent to the Temple, the academy of the empire they hate so much. Since he's royalty,

they couldn't execute him just because of the accident. It's as if they couldn't stand the sight of him, so they sent him far away. And then, they cut off their interest in him. Well, even now, there's the perception that supernatural powers are ominous forces, but back then…"

"That's true."

Ominous power.

Supernatural powers

The mysterious origins of supernatural powers often led to them being perceived as ominous, with the stigma likely being even stronger in the past.

"Doesn't the punishment seem a bit excessive?"

Someone had died, and even siblings had died. But in the end, it was still an accident.

It felt like the punishment Heinrich received was somewhat harsh.

He was royalty, after all.

"I couldn't help but think… that he was being excessively hated."

The Temple was a school attended by the children of influential people, royalty, and nobility from various places.

They gathered together, socialized, and received an education.

But in the end, it was a school filled with the children of the influential.

"If you look at the backgrounds of the students who come to the Temple, you can get a sense of the political situations in various places. The Temple also serves as an intelligence gathering place, sifting through that information to gauge the state of the continent."

"Really?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

In the end, the Temple collected information about the students. Of course, it was limited to those from powerful families, royalty, and other prestigious lineages.

"Well, they don't actively pry into the students' lives, but they simply deduce from the information provided. There's even a dedicated department in the Temple for that."

I had just learned one of the Temple's secrets.

Though it wasn't a specialized intelligence department, the Temple had no reason not to use the vast amount of information that accumulated there.

"So… the information I received about Heinrich von Schwarz… it's speculative, but there's one important thing."

"What is it?"

"Heinrich is hated by the royal family. Quite severely, at that."

"I see."

"Supernatural powers often awaken in extreme mental states, right?"

"Yes, that's… true."

"I wonder what kind of situation Heinrich was in when his powers awakened. However, he can't remember the process because it happened when he was too young."

Supernatural powers awaken in extreme mental states.

Heinrich had killed his siblings.

Because of that incident, he was hated by the Kernstadt royals and was forced to come to the Temple.

What lied beneath that.

"I think he was abused."

"…"

"It's not that he was hated for killing his youngest sibling. The sequence of events is different."

Charlotte spoke calmly.

"He was hated from the beginning."

Due to his siblings' abuse, Heinrich von Schwarz experienced immense pain at a young age.

In the midst of that, he awakened his pyrokinesis and killed his siblings.

Though it was a homicide, it was still an accident.

His supernatural power awakened after emotional distress due to abuse.

And the reason for the abuse.

He wouldn't have been abused for no reason.

"There's a possibility that Heinrich von Schwarz is an illegitimate child."

Charlotte made a chilling deduction.

"That would explain why Heinrich has received so much hatred from his siblings, and why, as you mentioned, the Schwarz royals stationed here are trying to kill Heinrich in this situation."

It was a terrible thing to say about Heinrich.

But Charlotte's cruel deduction revealed another truth about the situation that I was unaware of.

The gaps in the story were filled.

I couldn't shake the feeling that we were close to the truth.

In that case, Heinrich would be unaware that he was an illegitimate child.

CHAPTER 528

The notion that Heinrich might be an illegitimate child was no more than a conjecture.

However, when viewed in this light, the loose threads of various incidents seemed to tie together perfectly.

Why hadn't Heinrich been sent to the academy within Kernstadt?

Why did they have to kill Heinrich, who was gradually becoming a hero in these circumstances?

The baseborn illegitimate child might be mentioned as a potential successor to the throne of Kernstadt, surpassing even the noble Louise von Schwarz.

This would be absolutely intolerable for the pure-blooded royal family.

"If this is true, Heinrich probably doesn't know about it either."

It was impossible to know whether this was the truth or not.

"The current Queen of Kernstadt, Solennin, is an extremely fastidious person. Her obsession with etiquette, dignity, and court appearances is no joke. Can you believe if I and Bertus have to learn about it? I haven't seen her in person very often, though."

The queen of a vassal state. A queen with a higher sense of etiquette and dignity than the empire itself.

However, this was ultimately a mere facade, and nobody considered the Queen of Kernstadt to be equal or superior to the Imperial Royals.

"And an illegitimate child… Just the existence of such a rumor would be enough to make her have a fit. No, if such a rumor were to spread in the world, she would go beyond chills and hang herself with a rope."

"So… Instead of an illegitimate child… She might have accepted him as her own

child?"

"Killing and disposing of him would have been easier, but well, King Constantine von Schwarz of Kernstadt is known for his obstinate personality. He might have been equally obstinate about the treatment of the illegitimate child. But, well, accepting him might have been possible, but loving him would have been impossible. The King of Kernstadt would have been unable to intervene in that aspect."

Finishing her story, Charlotte drained the last of her tea and exhaled.

"In the end, it's all conjecture. It might be that he wasn't an illegitimate child at all, and the royal family simply loved the fourth and fifth children so much that they couldn't help but hate the youngest."

Charlotte said that she was merely suggesting a possibility, a reasonable possibility. She was only telling what Temple had speculated.

But it was a brutally cruel possibility. It was a possibility that was all the more cruel because it was close to the truth.

Could Heinrich accept or believe this?

"That's all I can tell you. I don't know how to persuade Heinrich."

You are an illegitimate child.

You might be killed by your siblings because of that. No, your siblings have to kill you. They have to kill you before you receive even greater hero treatment in order to eliminate the possibility of the throne going to an illegitimate child.

An illegitimate child who killed two pure-blooded royals.

Wouldn't it be strange if they didn't hate Heinrich?

He has even become undeniably strong, receiving hero treatment in Kernstadt.

He was supposed to live in a corner, out of sight, confined to Temple, but now they had to reluctantly treat him like a brother because of the situation.

It would be enough to break their spirits.

"Hmm, I guess I have no choice but to tell Heinrich that he'll die if he doesn't side with me because he's an illegitimate child?"

"That's true…”

Charlotte laughed weakly.

The midnight consultation had come to an end.

Although I hadn't obtained the answer I wanted, I knew what needed to be done.

I could deduce to some extent how the fragile pieces I had set up were interwoven.

We had eaten and had tea.

Yet, somehow, we both felt unfulfilled, Charlotte and I.

Perhaps it was because we had had a proper conversation with each other for the first time in a long while.

We sat idly on the terrace, unable to do anything.

There was something to discuss.

“…Shall we go for a walk?"

"Huh? Oh. Yeah. Sure."

As if she had been waiting for those words, Charlotte nodded vigorously.

Charlotte and I left the castle and walked through the plains on the outskirts of Lazak.

Following the path, Lazak city was on the left, while the refugee camp formed on the right.

As Charlotte had planned, we occasionally saw people who we presumed to be members of the vigilante group, carrying torches and wandering around.

They were bound to be corrupted.

Charlotte's cruel plan was to purge these corrupt vigilantes and form a new group when the time came.

It was cruel not because Charlotte allowed corruption among them, but because their corruption was a sin caused by their own choices. The corrupt vigilante group, who would later be punished, could not escape the shackle of having chosen their sins.

Though they were merely being used, they would be judged without even realizing it.

Charlotte knew how humans would behave in certain situations.

Because there were people who would crawl into the predicted quagmire without even being instructed, and because they would be replenished by others.

That's why this policy was cruel.

I had no idea how far it had gone.

We no longer brought survivors from the continent.

Thus, Edina's population would no longer increase due to external influx.

We only needed to manage the people remaining in Edina.

We saved many people.

However, compared to the actual number of people who died, it was ultimately a mere handful.

Because of the chain of other events that happened as a result, unthinkable things occurred in the end.

Charlotte and I watched the torches moving in the refugee camp from afar as we walked together.

"How is the administration going? Is it manageable?"

"I don't know if it's manageable, but I'm somehow doing it. I've come to grasp the overall situation in Edina to some extent now. Things will gradually improve."

"That's a relief."

There was no other option but to improve.

Although it sounded good, it also seemed as if the situation was so dire that it couldn't get any worse.

Was I too pessimistic?

"Most of all, it's fortunate that there are no complaints from the demons. If it had been a normal situation, the resistance from the demons would have been greater than that of the humans."

"True."

Although there was no reason for the demons to live with humans, they obeyed without question because the Demon King commanded it.

The rule of the Demon King was thus both ideal and strange.

In a society made up only of demons, the Demon King could practice lifelong dictatorship without any resistance.

Hadn't Eleris said that when she was an Archdemon, she did just that, only to be defeated and exiled by her only demon son who could resist the Demon King?

The Demon King.

And the Princess.

Charlotte, who is now my regent.

When we first met, was this future predetermined?

"Charlotte."

"Hmm."

"I have no memory of living as a prince of the demon world."

At my words, Charlotte stopped walking and looked up at me.

"I was thrown into the world knowing only that I was the son of Demon King Valier."

Suddenly, on the day I spoke of those times, Charlotte gazed at me in silence.

"When I met you, I didn't know who you were."

"…"

"I won't bother making excuses for the many lies I told you, saying I had no choice."

Charlotte quietly listened to my story.

"But… I should apologize."

"…"

"I'm truly sorry for all the lies I've told you so far."

I don't know how to apologize so that my sincerity is conveyed.

I don't think I can be forgiven for deceiving Charlotte with just this one sentence.

However, I believe I must tell the story properly.

I think this is something I can't put off any longer, using busyness or having too many tasks as an excuse.

Charlotte watches me apologize and smiles quietly.

"Three times."

"Three times?"

"Once in the Demon King's castle, once in the Spring Palace, and here. That's three

times."

Charlotte looks at me.

The number of times I've saved Charlotte.

It seemed that's what she was talking about.

"It feels like the world hates me, and somehow, I have to die, but you keep saving me. I wonder if there will be another incident where I have to die."

It was a night when neither stars nor the moon were visible, perhaps due to the cloudy sky.

"You're strange."

"…"

"You should hate me."

"Hate you?"

"Yes."

Charlotte looks up at the night sky.

"I couldn't trust you even though you saved me several times. Even if I had no choice but to think that way. You saved me with pure intentions, but I couldn't trust you and cursed you."

I thought that could happen.

Numerous lies built a tower of misunderstandings, which was more persuasive than the truth.

That's why I thought it was inevitable.

I don't blame Charlotte.

"I had no choice but to do that."

At my words, Charlotte smiles bitterly.

"You saved and protected me so many times, but I couldn't trust you. If you had cursed me and blamed me, that would have been inevitable too."

Blaming Charlotte for not understanding my feelings.

That could have been entirely possible for me as well.

"I did what I had to do in that situation, but you didn't blame me in a situation where you had no choice but to blame."

"What's the difference… I think it's huge."

"You did something I couldn't do. And whenever I feel that you still don't blame me even a little, it feels strange."

"What am I? I haven't done anything for you, always received help, and even pushed you into the abyss at a crucial moment. But you saved me as if it were a given…"

"I don't know."

"That's why you feel distant now."

"I don't know if I can ever do anything for you. I think I'll never be able to repay you even in my lifetime."

Something that Charlotte must do for me.

Not a duty of a servant, but something Charlotte must do for me.

There's nothing like that.

I don't particularly want anything.

"Just live a healthy and good life."

"I thought you'd say that."

Charlotte covered her mouth and chuckled.

Should I have said more?

I need you, not just for duties like a servant, but for you to be present where my eyes can see. I wish you were always there.

Should I have said that?

Charlotte was the first life I saved when I arrived in this world.

It was true that Charlotte felt a different kind of attachment to me than she did to others.

"I want to do something with you."

Charlotte quietly spoke to me.

"Something you want to do together?"

"Yeah, something we can do right now."

Something she wanted to do with me at this time?

As I looked at her as if asking what it was, Charlotte rummaged through her belongings and pulled out something.

"Let's eat this together."

It was a biscuit wrapped in paper.

An item that symbolized the time we first met.

So she carries this with her?

Had she been saving it for a moment like this when we could eat it together?

"Sounds good."

At my response, Charlotte laughed lightly and unwrapped the biscuit, precisely breaking it in half.

It had been the same back then.

She had broken the biscuit I offered her in half and handed me a piece.

In that moment, when she was starving, I felt a strange emotion as I watched Charlotte, who couldn't just eat it herself, hand me half.

When I handed her the biscuit, had she been thinking the same thing?

Though the actual circumstances were different, she had given me all of the precious food in that moment.

Charlotte handed me the half of the biscuit she had split and bit into her own piece.

She had been carrying this biscuit to give to me someday.

She must have wanted to talk to me that much and had always been prepared to do so.

In the end, it wasn't until quite some time after Charlotte had arrived in Edina that we were able to bring up the stories from our first meeting.

We sat leaning against each other on a hill overlooking the refugee camp and the city of Lazak, eating biscuits.

Of course, these biscuits were not the same as the ones we had then.

"It tastes different from that time."

"It can't be helped."

Charlotte and I munched on the biscuits as we talked.

The situation was different, and objectively, these biscuits were not as delicious as the ones we had back then. Naturally, the biscuits the demon prince had carried were of a higher quality, and the ones available in Edina were bound to be inferior.

The luxurious biscuits that we had eaten when we were so hungry that anything would have tasted good.

Ordinary biscuits eaten when we weren't particularly hungry.

They couldn't taste the same.

Charlotte had thought that she could never eat anything more delicious than the biscuits she had eaten back then, so she didn't really care what she ate after that.

That had happened in the Imperial Capital.

Though the taste wasn't the same as that time.

Still, we could eat biscuits together.

In the end, after going around in circles, we could be together.

We don't resent or hate each other anymore.

I don't have to lie to Charlotte anymore.

"Reinhardt."

"Yeah."

"What do you plan to do when all this is over?"

As she took a bite of her biscuit, Charlotte asked me.

After everything is over. After the Gate incident.

If I survive the final battle and somehow manage to settle matters with Ellen.

If I'm still alive then.

What should I do?

"I don't know."

It's overwhelming to think about the distant future when I don't even know whether I'll be able to exist that far ahead, given the current situation.

I'm not the kind of person who can think about an uncertain, excessively distant future.

Heinrich is in danger of being assassinated, and I haven't found a solution to that problem yet, let alone thinking about what will happen after everything is over.

"War… it will probably be inevitable."

“…I guess so."

"Yeah, after everything is settled. Eventually, the fact that we have a foothold in Edina will be known throughout the continent. I don't know when, but it'll certainly happen."

Charlotte is in charge of the preparations.

It's a position that demands thinking about the future. And that is a problem I, as the king, must also think about.

After the Gate incident is resolved, humans will deal with the remaining monsters on the continent and lay the groundwork for reconstruction.

We could create our own paradise here, far from the continent, hiding in plain sight.

But we can't avoid encountering each other forever.

At some point, a collision between humanity and Edina is inevitable.

Charlotte's mention of war isn't exactly new. I've been thinking about the issue as well.

But such a war cannot be avoided.

As humanity rebuilds and the situation improves, their desire for revenge against me, the cause of this calamity, will want to be appeased.

When word spreads that the Demon King has established a base in Edina, the moment will come when we must battle the punitive forces of humanity.

It's something that may not happen in the short term, but is bound to occur

eventually.

Charlotte gently pats my shoulder, seemingly aware of my dilemma.

When I turn my head, Charlotte gazes at me with a slightly tilted head.

"Want to hear something interesting?"

“…What?"

"Because you're with me, you can claim to be the heir to the Gardias Royal Family."

What is she talking about?

"Also, you possess two sacred artifacts. You can assert enough influence over the Five Great Religious Orders. Or, you could reform them into the United Holy Church, putting Olivia Lanze at the forefront, and absorb their power. That's possible too."

"What are you talking about?"

It was a terrifying idea.

"Of course, the demons will follow your rule. That goes without saying."

Charlotte looks at me.

"Reinhardt."

What is she trying to say?

I felt a shiver run down my spine.

"You could become not just the ruler of an empire, but of the entire world."

Not the emperor of humanity, nor the king of demons.

The ruler of the world.

"Do you think humans will hate and despise you, and therefore won't accept your rule?"

As if she already knows, Charlotte has a subtle smile on her face.

"People don't live as citizens of the Gardias Empire because they support it."

"…"

"Rule is passive. It doesn't matter if it's the Gardias Royal Family at the top or the despised Demon King. There's no need to persuade from the beginning. There hasn't been any persuasion either."

Rule is just rule.

It doesn't require the support of the masses.

"A ruler just needs to be strong. As long as you're so powerful that no one beneath you dares to defy or overthrow you, that's all. Whether you rule Edina's people with a protective hand or become humanity's oppressor under the guise of oppression and fear, it's the same."

The hatred of humanity.

If that will eventually overwhelm me, am I allowed to strike at them first?

If the war is to happen someday, should I consider confronting it head-on or even launching a preemptive attack?

"What about Bertus…? What will happen?"

At my words, Charlotte speaks with her head buried between her knees.

"I believe… he'll be saved."

Emperor of the Continent.

King of the world.

It's not that I never considered such possibilities.

I didn't necessarily think that a ruler of humanity had to be from an empire.

But now, Charlotte is saying that I must consider that enormous proposition.

"It just… feels like you're only thinking about what you might lose after everything ends. It seems like you're only afraid of that."

"…"

"You might not just lose something; you could gain something too."

It was a thought that seemed quite far from my perspective.

Charlotte looks at me.

"I wanted to let you know that you could make up your mind to have everything and not miss out on anything."

After the Gate incident ends, war breaks out, and someone dies.

Someone from Edina will be lost.

But that's not it.

You can try to have everything in the world.

That's what Charlotte was saying.

Can a country exist where all citizens dislike their king?

Can such a thing be established?

Even if it could be established, should such a thing be allowed?

Speaking in terms of possibility and impossibility, it's possible.

If hatred is turned into fear, that rule can be established.

If the fear is greater than the hatred towards me, no matter how much humanity despises me, I can keep them under my feet.

But can I handle that?

I, who can barely manage this small island nation and have entrusted it to Charlotte.

Do I have even the slightest capacity to pull off such a crazy feat, becoming the ruler of the entire world?

"…"

Just because I don't want to lose a single thing, is it okay to try and have everything?

CHAPTER 529

In the depths of night.

Charlotte had gone to her bedroom, and so had I.

Harriet had apparently dozed off while studying, as she was asleep with a book on her lap, leaning against the bed.

Carefully, I placed the book on the study table and laid Harriet down properly.

Seemingly sensing my touch, Harriet chuckled in her sleep.

“Reinhardt… cat… good… nice…”

So adorable, I wanted to bite her.

I too leaned against the bed, preparing to sleep.

Since I had told Airi to rest today, she would not be coming.

The king of the world.

It wasn't something I hadn't considered, but I had never really delved deeply into the subject.

It was something I couldn't know until I thought about it now.

The problem at hand was the assassination of Heinrich von Schwarz.

It was difficult to interfere carelessly, and Charlotte said that capturing Heinrich was the best method.

A method.

I had a secret method that no one knew about.

Although I had stopped using it well since the world began to turn in a way that somehow tried to screw me over, the system function still existed.

I couldn't tell when or how it would screw me over, and its reliability had decreased.

After a very long time, I decided to use the rollback function.

The assassination of Heinrich von Schwarz would not occur.

[Please specify the date range.]

Date range.

Well, I guess I need to specify a date range since using rollback would ensure Heinrich wouldn't be threatened by assassination for the rest of his life.

I could prevent the assassination for a week. But the assassination could happen the day after that.

It's a temporary solution until I can solve the real problem.

For now, how about ten days?

[To cause the event, 2,000 achievement points are required.]

The required achievement points are 2,000.

My total achievement points, including those I had secured while roaming the Sren Mountain Range, amounted to around 30,000.

I could do it.

I could guarantee Heinrich's safety for ten days. And then for another ten days after that.

However, this campaign won't end in just a month or two. Naturally, it would span years.

But if I continue to postpone it like this, I would eventually run out of achievement points.

I already knew that I couldn't do anything significant with the rollback function.

I couldn't cause extremely significant events, nor could I avoid crucial ones. From the beginning, it was only meant to function as an auxiliary.

There was just too much I couldn't expect from the rollback.

So, what about something else?

Another long-forgotten system cheat.

[Advice of the Oracle - 150 points]

The advice of the Oracle had not been of much direct help. It mostly threw me into new situations.

It typically provided help and danger simultaneously.

Considering that I'm still alive, it must have been helpful, even though I didn't use it often.

One way or another, the first piece of advice from the Oracle led me to Eleris's shop, which is the root of all these stories. However, I hadn't used it much since then. It wasn't particularly necessary, and it often caused confusion.

And there was always the possibility that it was a trap.

In the current situation, where I must make the best choice in almost every circumstance, relying on the potentially risky advice of the Oracle might be better left untouched. It could just complicate things further.

That's why I didn't even look at the advice regarding Ellen's case. I didn't even try the rollback since it was obvious that it would be useless.

What about this time?

As the assassination of Heinrich von Schwarz loomed, I wondered what I should do.

I hoped it wouldn't be one of those pieces of advice that only served to further complicate matters.

[Absolute Fate Advisor's advice]

[Do nothing.]

"…"

Just as I suspected.

It was advice that only complicated things.

Telling me to do nothing.

I couldn't tell if it meant that I should just let things be, or if it would be better for Heinrich to die, or that trying to make direct contact would only make the situation worse.

What if I do nothing?

So what? Are you saying it's better to let him die? Or is it better to leave him alone?

If you're going to talk, finish what you have to say!

The advice was direct, but the outcome was anything but intuitive, making my head feel like it would explode.

In cases like these, ambiguous advice was even more ridiculous.

Are you one of them too?

[Ambiguous Fate Advisor's advice]

[Why is Heinrich von Schwarz alive?]

What kind of nonsense was this now?

Was it suggesting that it was strange for Heinrich to be alive in the first place?

Achievement points used: 300

There was still quite a lot left, but still, achievement points…

“……sigh."

My head ached.

I should just sleep.

"Uh, goodnight… goodnight, lullaby…”

What kind of dream was our blockhead having?

Was it a dream where a cat-like me was putting her to sleep?

In the end, I couldn't help but stroke the blockhead's head a few times.

Kernstadt Army Headquarters.

Late at night, only three people remained in the headquarters, while all the other commanders and soldiers slept.

"Sister, I'm not sure if this is the right thing to do."

"What are you talking about?"

"Is it right to integrate that bastard into our army?"

Alphonse von Schwarz chimed in at the words of German von Schwarz, the second and eldest son.

"I can't stand the sight of that brat. Why do we have to command the army alongside that filthy bastard? Just seeing him being treated like a big shot lately makes me nauseous."

"Didn't I tell you not to use that word?"

At Louise's words, German and Alphonse's expressions hardened.

"We apologize."

“……We apologize."

"Even in private, mentioning such a word so carelessly is a problem. How many times have I told you that people like us should never utter such an ominous word? What will you do if someone hears you?"

Bastard.

If anyone found out that the Schwarz royalty had mentioned the word "bastard," it would cause a problem.

People would sense the implication that there was an issue with a bastard.

The siblings picked up the problematic word too easily. Alphonse, the third, broke the silence that followed Louise's words.

"Anyway… I don't understand why we have to integrate the youngest one into our army. His position will only grow stronger."

"That's right. Wouldn't it be better to keep him away from our army, perhaps with the Temple or the Allied Forces?"

Changing Heinrich von Schwarz's affiliation to the Kernstadt Army was risky.

It might be different in ordinary situations, but the bastard's position was gradually solidifying.

The second and third siblings judged that their positions as heirs could be threatened.

However, Louise von Schwarz shook her head.

"Whether he returns as a hero, or is treated as one here, it's all the same. After all, we are part of the enormous system called the Allied Forces. No matter how far apart we are, as long as we belong to the same system, there are no gains to be had by distancing ourselves."

"…”

"…”

"We should utilize what we can, shouldn't we? Just by bringing the youngest to our side, the Supreme Command will need the approval of the Schwarz Royal Family to deploy Heinrich in future operations. Do you not understand what this means?"

The youngest, who had become too influential to be simply dismissed as a bastard.

"It doesn't matter where a useful person comes from or their background. Think about the aftermath of the war."

"After that…"

Louise von Schwarz's cold gaze shone.

"Do you think the empire will still be the same?"

"!"

"El, elder sister?"

At the mention of the forbidden word, the siblings' expressions hardened.

"The empire will exist."

A smile hung on the corner of Louise von Schwarz's mouth.

"But there is no law stating that the Gardias Royal Family must always be the ruler of the empire."

"In this situation, Heinrich von Schwarz's studying at the temple will only serve to prove the empire's capabilities."

"It means he will be treated as a talent nurtured by the empire."

"Heinrich must establish his merit. He must rise through the ranks in this Kernstadt army, in the name of the Schwarz Royal Family."

"Why should we hand over any achievements we secure to the empire?"

"Will we be content living in a mere façade of the Number One Imperial Vassal State forever?"

"Where is the law that says the Schwarz Royal Family cannot become the Schwarz Imperial Family?"

"At no time has the empire been weaker than now, and if the empire is thinking about the aftermath of everything, why shouldn't we?"

"The person who could change the Schwarz Royal Family into the imperial family is… yes, a bastard."

The unspoken word emerged from Louise von Schwarz's mouth.

"If a bastard can help, then by all means. No, even if it's the bastard's child, we should use him. Is this the time to care about personal pride?"

At Louise's words, Alphonse and German's expressions became strange.

In this situation, Louise von Schwarz is trying to topple the Gardias Royal Family after the war.

Kernstadt will take their place.

Receiving Heinrich von Schwarz into their command structure is just the beginning.

"But, elder sister… the support for the youngest from the army and the people…"

"After the war… we might not be able to interfere with him so easily."

In the eyes of the two siblings, Louise von Schwarz read the fear of an uncertain future.

As much as they disliked Heinrich, they were afraid of him.

"I said we'd use him. Did I say we'd go all the way with him?"

Eldest sister.

Louise von Schwarz shook her head as if to say not to worry.

"The epic of a hero is always created only after that hero has laid down his body on the cold ground."

At the cold expression of the eldest sister, as if everything was calculated, Alphonse and German held their breath.

Saviolin Turner, who was in charge of the vanguard mission, sat on her horse, quietly observing the surrounding scenery.

"This area wasn't supposed to be part of the operational zone."

Saviolin Turner and the soldiers she led silently looked around the surrounding scenery, positioned on a hill.

Their role was to wait for the next advance, check the enemy's monster hordes, plants, and dense areas in front of them, and then strike and annihilate them if possible.

Ellen had also taken on a similar role, but she was currently dispatched to a different operational area.

Thus, the location where Saviolin Turner now stood had never been designated as a coalition operation area, and no army had ever been dispatched there.

"……"

However, amidst the silence, what Saviolin Turner saw were the scattered corpses of monsters, as if someone had already swept through the area once.

The monsters in this place were not supposed to be exterminated, yet their corpses were strewn about as if a wave had washed over them.

Some monsters were seen coming and going, but it was assumed they had migrated from other locations.

"Has someone other than us… already swept through and passed this place once…?"

Saviolin Turner and the other members of the squad sensed that something peculiar had occurred.

"Let's return to the garrison. We need to look into this further."

Though not having witnessed it directly, Saviolin Turner couldn't help but have some inkling of the identity of the mysterious support force.

At about the same time, the vanguard led by Ellen encountered a similar scene.

Reconnaissance, tracking, and extermination when possible.

If the enemy's numbers were too great, the original directive was to retreat and bring a larger force. However, since Ellen had gained the ability to harness Lapelt's power, she had annihilated most of the enemies she encountered.

In fact, her squad members hardly had to exert themselves.

Sweep through once with flames, and any enemies not killed by the fire are cut down with a void sword.

No enemy had survived the void sword yet.

However, Ellen, who had overcome the limitation of only being able to engage in close combat, was capable of performing feats akin to a one-person army.

"……”

Ellen and her subordinates saw the same remnants of slaughtered monster hordes that Saviolin Turner's squad had encountered.

They were either burned to death, slashed apart by something, or shattered into pieces.

The different manners of death indicated that this wasn't the work of a single individual but rather several.

An unidentified squad capable of using various types of power had already dealt with the monsters.

"It seems all the monsters in this area have been wiped out. There are still some, but their numbers are extremely low, suggesting they have migrated from other areas after the extermination."

“…Is that so?"

After confirming the absence of monsters in the area, the squad members who had gone out to scout in all directions returned with the same report.

Monsters in the vicinity of the planned march route had been completely wiped out.

There were still some monsters, but they were believed to have appeared from other areas after the extermination.

There were unidentified collaborators.

Ellen stared at the scene, clutching her necklace in her left hand.

'Rein… Reinhardt… '

Ellen seemed to know whose work this was.

She struggled to hold on to her fading consciousness.

Just thinking of that name caused anger and hatred to consume her mind.

It wasn't a cursed name.

Every time she thought of the Demon King and Reinhardt, Ellen felt negative emotions devour her entire body, down to the last cell.

Sometimes she even lost her consciousness.

But it wasn't a loss of consciousness that made her collapse.

For a moment, it was as if someone else was controlling her body, not causing her to fall, but rather taking control of Ellen's body.

It didn't do anything strange.

It simply carried out its mission like Ellen, hunting monsters and following military orders.

The only difference was that it wasn't Ellen.

Someone was controlling her body.

Although the frequency wasn't too high yet, Ellen was secretly certain that it would gradually increase.

Clutching the necklace in her left hand, Ellen gazed at the plain where the monsters had been slaughtered.

"Let's go back."

Ellen turned the horse's head.

Some already had an inkling of the truth about this mysterious situation.

Of course.

'Could it be…?'

Ellen couldn't help but wonder if that black, fluffy creature would be waiting for her when she returned to the garrison.

The spirits that hated the Demon King did not hate or dislike small animals.

That's why she didn't feel the agonizing pain that seemed to tear her head apart just by thinking about it.

Something that wasn't pain just by thinking about it.

Having such a thing wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

Of course, when Ellen returned to the Royal Class garrison, the black kitten was nowhere to be found.

Feeling somewhat disappointed, Ellen spent the entire day brooding for a different reason than before.

Upon returning to the garrison, Saviolin Turner shared the current situation with the High Command on a top-secret basis.

Unknown individuals were clearing the way ahead.

Saviolin Turner didn't mention that they were suspected to be forces of the Demon King. If that information spread throughout the garrison, it would only cause more confusion.

If the information were to spread carelessly, it might lead to soldiers and commanders panicking, thinking that they were entering a trap set by the Demon King, rather than speeding up the march.

The fact that the Demon King's forces were cooperating would actually hinder the army's advance.

The secret must be kept, but if it became known, it had to be presented as if it were part of the Allied Forces' strategy.

After reporting the events on the march route to the High Command, Saviolin Turner sought someone out.

Someone who could grasp this situation more quickly and accurately than anyone else.

"Frontline reconnaissance…?"

"Yes, we need your power."

It was none other than Kono Lint, a teleportation ability user.

CHAPTER 530

Kono Lint's Supernatural powers had mostly been used for rescuing people since the Gate incident. Although his abilities had developed, his personal combat skills remained lacking due to his lack of overall growth as an individual.

However, his Supernatural power of spatial teleportation allowed Kono Lint to move not only himself but also others without any limitations.

If one were to ask if Kono Lint's power couldn't be used for offense, the answer wouldn't be a definite no.

However, to kill a monster, he needed to teleport along with a monster possessing less than roughly 200kg of mass.

For example, he could move to an extreme altitude and drop the creature from there.

Of course, after experiencing immense pain from air pressure, Kono Lint gave up on using his ability offensively.

Initially, while Kono Lint was busy trying to capture a monster his size, Ellen Artorius and Heinrich would commit massacres.

That's why Kono Lint had taken on the role of rescuing survivors from battlefields.

At this point, Lint's power was responsible for evacuating incapacitated soldiers from massive battles to safer areas.

His spatial teleportation ability made him akin to a mage who could use magic without casting.

Although he couldn't teleport across continents, he compensated by increasing the number of uses according to distance.

Using consecutive teleportations, Kono Lint could return to the faraway Imperial Capital within five minutes.

He was a scout that could be deployed and retreated from any situation at any time.

The instructions he received from Saviolin Turner were simple.

Verify up to which point the monsters on the path of the march had been annihilated.

He had heard about unidentified forces sabotaging the allied forces' march.

As a Supernatural who didn't need to cast, Kono Lint immediately set off.

-POP!

In less than a minute, Kono Lint reached the point where Saviolin Turner and Ellen had arrived previously.

"Unidentified forces, huh…"

Kono Lint glanced at the traces of the slaughtered monsters and disappeared once more.

After some more movement,

"…Huh? What?"

Suddenly, his surroundings were so bright that he had to squint his eyes.

-THUD!

"Ugh, wh-what?!"

He found himself buried in an unexpected pile of snow.

His face drained of color as he stared up at the sky, still buried in the snow.

"Ah! It's freezing!"

Kono Lint hastily used his teleportation in the suddenly transformed snowy landscape.

He didn't have the ability to fly, but he could teleport into the air.

Although he couldn't stop falling, he could virtually float in midair if he kept teleporting upward.

Of course, the sensation of falling was so horrible that he rarely used it.

From high above, he gazed down.

"What… What is this…?"

Kono Lint couldn't help but be dumbfounded as he faced the vast white expanse where nothing but snow could be seen.

—---

"Snow?"

"Yes, Commander. There was an immense amount of snow falling. Unnaturally so."

An enormous amount of snow had fallen over a huge area, far surpassing a single urban district.

Saviolin Turner furrowed her brow at Kono Lint's report.

Kono Lint had already grasped the scale of the area where the snow had fallen.

"It's not the season for snow. It must be an artificial phenomenon…"

"Yes, perhaps…"

"The monsters?"

"There were some alive, but most of them seem to have been buried in the snow and wiped out."

"I see."

Snow had fallen over a vast area.

Saviolin Turner quietly stared at the area marked on the map by Kono Lint.

There is a top-tier magic called Blizzard.

It's a large-scale weather-changing spell that summons a snowstorm over a certain area.

However, there is no magician capable of casting such a spell on this scale. Unless it's a legendary dragon, there is no magic to bury monsters under the snow and kill them within this range.

Is it magic or something else?

The advancing army has its limits, so by the time it arrives, the snow will have almost melted.

With the drastically reduced number of monsters to deal with during the march, the path ahead will be easier.

Reinhardt's forces are aiding the allied forces' advance.

Not only have the monsters been physically dealt with, but they have also caused a large-scale weather anomaly that eliminated the horde of monsters.

The advance will surely become easier and faster.

"What… is this situation?"

Saviolin Turner shook his head at Kono Lint's question.

"There's no point in knowing."

"Ah… I suppose so."

Reinhardt's name is forbidden in this world.

The Demon King is aiding the allied forces.

That is certain.

"…"

If the fact that the Demon King is aiding the allied forces were to be revealed, it would only cause chaos at the garrison.

To those who don't believe in the Demon King's goodwill, this phenomenon appears as an unknown horror designed by the Demon King for the allied forces.

A few, including Saviolin Turner, know there's no need to fear the Demon King's assistance.

But what if this large-scale weather anomaly occurred at the garrison?

It is humanity's strongest and last army.

If this army disappears, humanity will be extinct.

So, the Demon King can destroy humanity at any time.

Turner knows there's no need to fear the Demon King.

But she confirmed that the Demon King has an undeniable power to be feared.

At any moment, humanity could disappear if the Demon King changes his mind even slightly.

'I shouldn't be afraid… I'm sure I shouldn't… '

Saviolin Turner, pressing down on her eyelid, let out a deep sigh.

'It's too scary… '

Humanity exists because of the Demon King's mercy.

However, most humans hate the Demon King.

A few who know that humanity's end comes when the Demon King's mercy disappears can't help but fear him even more.

Cats are naturally like that.

"Originally, it's like that. You think you're close, but you're not. They suddenly disappear and reappear."

That was Christina's explanation.

A few days had passed since the cat disappeared. Everyone was missing it.

Not only Ellen, but everyone at the garrison had been disappointed when they tried to check on the cat upon returning.

The command center had delayed the advance date by a few days to gather detailed information on the events in the forward area.

However, since the horde of monsters was nearly exterminated, Ellen had no reason to deploy and remained at the Royal Class garrison.

The kitten that had caused a stir in the Royal Class garrison for a day had vanished without a trace.

Cats can suddenly disappear and reappear.

It could be hiding somewhere in the Royal Class garrison or have gone to another garrison.

The garrison was vast, making it difficult to find a single black kitten.

It was absurd to search for it as if it were her own after having it for just one day.

Ellen knew full well that her situation did not warrant such concern for a mere cat.

It was just one day.

To be so troubled over a small creature she had only cared for a single day was laughable.

Did she like cute things?

Ellen wondered about herself but couldn't quite tell.

What mattered was that she worried for the kitten that had gone somewhere.

The small creature could hardly manage to climb onto the bed, let alone descend it; it didn't seem capable of prowling around the garrison.

The thought of it getting stepped on by someone unknowingly sent shivers down her spine.

The blanket on which the cat had sat in the dining tent remained untouched.

Like Ellen, no one had removed it, hoping the kitten would return and sit there again.

Ellen quietly ate her meal while looking at the blanket.

"Do you miss the kitten?"

It was a question from Christina, who sat across from her.

Did her expression give it all away?

Ellen muttered, staring at her stew plate.

Did she miss it?

What she truly missed was something else.

But just thinking about that name made her head feel like it was going to explode.

She had taken it all in, so it should be fine.

It had to be fine.

Buzzing

"…"

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just a moment. I'm a little dizzy…"

Ellen breathed deeply, trying to calm herself from the pain of tinnitus that threatened to take her consciousness. After a few deep breaths, clutching the

necklace in her left hand, her mind regained some stability.

The feeling of emotions splitting.

Hatred and anger, along with affection, manifested simultaneously, creating a bizarre pain that never became familiar, no matter how many times she experienced it.

She consciously tried not to think about Reinhardt.

That name had become too painful for Ellen, physically, mentally, and spiritually.

It was better to think about something else.

Something so small and insignificant.

It was better to think about a seemingly meaningless existence.

Thinking about Reinhardt wouldn't make anything better.

It would only hurt more.

“…It feels strange."

"What does?"

"Just, it's an animal."

The strange feeling wouldn't go away.

"I'm worried."

Ellen found it strange that amidst a battlefield filled with countless humans in danger and dying, she worried for a small creature that could hardly fend for itself.

That night.

The image of the small kitten, crying as if resonating with her own pain, did not leave her mind.

It was an animal, but it didn't seem like just an animal.

Was it right for her, who should be worrying about people, to be concerned about a single animal?

No, beyond worry.

Was it even more absurd to feel hurt?

There was no promise made, and the kitten couldn't possibly understand her words. Telling it to come back was just a casual remark, and the kitten couldn't have understood it.

It was strange to have such expectations for an animal.

"I'm worried too. I wonder where that tiny thing went?"

Christina sighed deeply, as if understanding Ellen's feelings.

She comforted Ellen, assuring her that it wasn't so strange.

The kitten couldn't even run properly, and soon, they would be leaving the garrison. How could it possibly keep up with the marching army without anyone to look after it?

It could hitch a ride on a carriage, but what if something went wrong?

Knowing that it was ridiculous to worry, they couldn't help but be concerned.

"Anyway, it's strange how much it liked Ellen."

"…"

"Do cats have some kind of eye for recognizing heroes?"

"There's no way."

"Is that so?"

Many people talked about the guest who had come and gone in the blink of an eye, seemingly disappointed like Ellen at the Royal Class.

"Anyway, I heard Anna requested something strange for the supplies?"

"Something strange…?"

"Yeah, she said it's something a cat would like, but I don't know what it is. No matter how you look at it, how can she put such a thing on the research supply request list? We don't even know if it exists, and the request has already been sent, so we can't cancel it. Sigh…"

Anna, a talent in dark magic, not only went on battle dispatches but also assisted Christina's alchemy experiments for quite a while during the Temple period.

That's why she still helps Christina's alchemy experiments when she has time.

But it seems she added cat-related items to the supply list after seeing the cat last time.

In other words, it's a kind of military corruption. Although the degree is not severe, it's not a good action.

"…That's not okay."

Even Ellen muttered as much.

"It's not the first day Anna has done something unexpected. Before that too… Hm."

Christina tried to say something but then closed her mouth. Ellen seemed to understand what Christina had stopped herself from saying.

It was about when they were in the magic research club. She tried to feed Reinhardt some strange potion or something.

Ellen took a deep breath and slowly ate the stew.

"Adelia stayed up all night making something like a cat house. What on earth is she doing when she has free time? She doesn't even seem to have time to sleep these days."

"…Really?"

"But actually, I also tried to find someone who has raised a cat before."

"Ah…"

Ellen was rather sympathetic.

All of the Royal Class were extremely upset.

But in the end, the cat didn't show up after it disappeared.

It's like closing the barn door after the cow is gone.

The cow doesn't even think about coming back, yet everyone is building barns.

“So dogs are better than cats, huh?”

“Whether it's a dog or a cat, it's good to have one. Can we afford to choose?”

“That's true.”

There were more students who were more upset than Ellen.

There were, of course, talks like "This is why cats aren't good," or "This is why dogs are better," but there were also stories about how cuteness is the best. There were also stories about how dogs are cute too.

It may be sad that they can be so excited about one small existence in this barren and rigid place.

The underlying reality where they can't find joy in anything but that is revealed.

In the grand scheme of things, there's despair and pain, and in the battles before their eyes, they don't know who will die.

If they talk about heavy matters, the atmosphere becomes heavy, and only gloomy stories can be exchanged.

So, they talk about small things.

Only cute things, only pitiful things, only pitiful things.

A small thing that they can be sure they can help and protect.

Small beings can be taken care of with small efforts.

Saving humanity is more difficult than protecting and feeding one small animal.

So, is that why they talk about small things?

Ellen realizes why people can only talk about the story of the missing cat in the seemingly warm and friendly atmosphere.

Isn't this close to giving up?

Abandoning thoughts of exceeding the limits of one's abilities and focusing on small things instead.

Merely cuteness, of all things.

Pouring attention into something that isn't even human.

If that's not defeatism, what is?

Ellen thinks she mustn't be like that. Others might be able to, but she mustn't let her heart be stolen by such small creatures.

I have more important work to do.

Carrying a greater burden than devoting my heart to small animals.

People have expectations of me.

There are things I must do.

In any case, it was just a strange event that happened overnight. While it remains a rather unusual experience, there is no need for such experiences to continue.

Cats are like that, after all.

Suddenly appearing and suddenly disappearing.

Animals without loyalty or affection.

So, devoting attention to a single cat in matters involving the fate of humanity is not something Ellen can allow herself.

Ellen takes a deep breath and narrows her eyes.

"It doesn't matter if it doesn't come."

"It must be upset. It liked Ellen the most."

"So what, it's just an animal."

Ellen says that and scoops up a spoonful of stew.

“Huh?”

“Huh?! It's here!”

“Where have you been?”

Suddenly, there's commotion outside.

“…Huh? Could it be?"

Christina tilts her head, looking at the commotion outside the tent.

-Thud!

Ellen involuntarily leaps to her feet. The wooden chair Ellen was sitting on tips over with a loud noise.

From afar.

The cat that could barely walk properly comes running as if it's flying.

The cat runs like the wind, entering the dining tent and stopping in front of Ellen.

-Meow

"…"

Ellen looks down at the cat gazing up at her.

Ellen cautiously crouches down and looks at the cat.

"Really… what a creature…"

Suddenly appearing and suddenly disappearing.

Finally, reappearing.

Thinking it's such a strange animal.

-Meow

Ellen embraces the cat.

She called for it again.

She definitely said that, and although several days had passed, it returned.

"You kept your promise."

-Meow

Could it really understand what she's saying?

Ellen couldn't tell anymore.

"Didn't you say it didn't matter if it didn't come?"

"…"

At Christina's words, Ellen's face, unusually, turns red.

This must be resignation.

In the end, it's defeatism.

Even so, Ellen couldn't help but tightly embrace the small cat.

CHAPTER 531

The allied forces march once more.

The high command treated the information that a group, presumed to be the demon king's army, was clearing a path at the frontlines as top secret.

This was enough to be considered a scheme within the alliance.

By the time the allied forces reached the area where the heavy snow had fallen, the snow that had once covered the region had already melted away.

"It's a bit chilly."

"Indeed."

"Has autumn already arrived?"

The soldiers passing through the area could only feel a slightly cool temperature, completely unaware that a vast amount of snow had fallen here.

The allied forces, which had been sluggishly advancing, now quickly proceeded thanks to the suddenly cleared path. Although groups of roaming monsters appeared occasionally, they were small enough in scale to be dealt with by the reconnaissance squads of the alliance.

The alliance advanced, embracing the unidentified ally.

Soon, they crossed the border of RisEllen, confirming that the small warp gate in the border area had already been destroyed.

At last, after commencing their march, they successfully entered the operation zone.

"In the siege of Senkelien, the Kernstadt army will take charge of the right wing."

At the words of Louise von Schwarz, Heinrich and other members of the Kernstadt royal family nodded their heads.

Heinrich von Schwarz had been incorporated into the Kernstadt army.

The city of Senkelien, near the RisEllen border.

Although it was not a major city, it was one of the key strategic points with two medium-sized warp gates.

Naturally, the vicinity of Senkelien was teeming with monsters around the gates, so the allied forces preparing for the operation had set up a base at a considerable distance from the city, holding their meetings there.

Warp gates are fountains from which monsters pour forth.

To reach the gates, the forces had to advance while pushing back the monsters that lurked nearby.

Once they approached to a certain distance, they would launch an all-out attack on the warp gate, causing it to collapse.

However, the destruction of the warp gate was not the end. It was also necessary to eliminate the monsters that had already emerged from it.

Previously, the operation had been carried out by a reconnaissance squad led by Saviolin Turner, who would destroy the warp gate after a single breakthrough and then escape.

But the warp gates themselves had become increasingly powerful, and the number of monsters pouring out had become overwhelmingly large.

A one-shot destruction was now impossible.

Of course, it was not impossible to destroy the warp gate while maintaining the previous tactics.

However, in that case, not only Saviolin Turner but also the highly valuable forces of archmages and master-class knights would have to face immense risks.

Most of them were irreplaceable at this point in time.

If Saviolin Turner or Ellen Artorius were to die during such an operation, it would not only break morale but also render future reconnaissance operations impossible.

Hence, an army was dispatched.

To offset the irreplaceable forces with the deaths of replaceable individuals.

"In this operation, we will eliminate the monsters on the right side of the allied forces. After annihilating the monsters with rear artillery support, when the army successfully advances and reaches the outskirts of Senkelien, the reconnaissance squad led by Ellen Artorius and Saviolin Turner will enter the city."

Louise explained the operation details received from the high command.

"Heinrich. You will be responsible for eliminating the monsters before the vanguard of our army advances."

"Yes, sister."

Heinrich nodded with a serious expression.

Heinrich's opinion on being incorporated into the Kernstadt army did not matter.

Louise von Schwarz wanted Heinrich's affiliation rearranged, and the grounds and justification for it were clear.

Protection for the direct royal lineage.

The empire had no reason to refuse and did not particularly object.

Refusal alone would have already caused conflict.

Heinrich also could not object to Louise von Schwarz's decision.

"Your brothers will kill you."

He didn't believe that.

However, recognizing that statement and not recognizing it were different matters altogether.

Moving his quarters to Kernstadt Headquarters and acting together with them, Heinrich lived with a sharp sense of unease.

He couldn't pinpoint the exact reason, but he felt as if someone was constantly stabbing him in the back.

Up until now, the objective had been the advancement of the allied forces.

But ultimately, that was just a secondary issue.

Just before the allied forces' first operation to destroy the warp gates commenced.

The garrison was rippling with the tension befitting a unit facing a large-scale battle.

It wasn't about wandering monsters in the wasteland, but destroying the warp gates from which they poured out.

If they completed their missions from the first to the last operation, the gate crisis would end.

Heinrich looked at the garrison, where fear, determination, and fighting spirit were swirling.

"Are you worried?"

“…Brother."

In front of the headquarters' barracks, Heinrich spoke with a tense expression. Alphonse von Schwarz, his second eldest brother, approached him with a smile.

-Tap tap

"With your power, you can wipe out all monsters. What are you worried about?"

“…It's not always like that. There are many monsters that aren't affected by fire."

"Others will handle that. I'm more worried about when our sister will join the fight."

Aren't you being too optimistic about the situation?

This isn't a war for glory; it's a war for survival.

Heinrich had such thoughts but didn't voice them.

To Heinrich's eyes, his second brother didn't seem to take the war very seriously.

He overestimated the allied forces' strength.

And he believed that, no matter what happened, he would survive. As if it were an inevitable outcome.

So, he made sarcastic jokes that if Heinrich defeated all the monsters, he'd be nothing more than a henchman.

Many people are willing to die in their stead.

The certainty of survival that comes from knowing others will die instead.

Whenever Heinrich saw that, a feeling of discomfort welled up deep within him.

He didn't know his brothers well.

However, the aspects of his brothers he saw while staying at the Kernstadt Headquarters barracks were often disappointing.

"What a convenient ability, to easily sweep away monsters from a distance. Isn't it?"

Alphonse, with a hand on his shoulder, grinned slyly.

Heinrich felt the sarcasm in that expression.

A superhuman who can defeat monsters and gain glory without any danger.

It was a blatant contempt, not because he was better, but because he was a superhuman.

Feeling the sarcasm and contempt in that expression, Heinrich nodded his head.

Why is he like this?

Why like this?

Is he deliberately trying to make me angry?

Heinrich wondered.

"Yes, brother."

“…Huh?"

"Compared to Ellen or Turner, I do have it much easier."

From the beginning, Heinrich himself thought so, thus those words couldn't provoke him.

Compared to those who had to fight directly, Heinrich thought it was true that he was nothing, as he could only annihilate monsters from a distance using his supernatural abilities.

"…”

Alphonse stared intently at Heinrich's face, which had no response to the obvious sarcasm.

"Are you saying you're a person who can be compared to the hero or Saviolin Turner?"

“…That's not what I meant."

"Our youngest… Quite unfortunate, isn't he?"

"Unfortunate?"

"Becoming arrogant enough to cross the line after being with those imperial bastards?"

Even though it wasn't twisted, it was perceived as twisted.

Heinrich forgot what to say as he looked at Alphonse, who ultimately took his answer as sarcasm, even though that wasn't his intention.

His brothers didn't like him.

They accepted him, but only because he was useful.

Heinrich couldn't help but know that his brothers disliked him.

The accident from his childhood.

Since then, his brothers saw him as worse than an insect, and it was no different even after so much time had passed.

Heinrich couldn't help but think that way.

Heinrich saw a messenger running frantically.

"Urgent news!"

“…What is it?"

Approaching the messenger who was catching his rough breath from running, Alphonse asked.

"Reports from the scouting unit say a tornado has occurred in the current planned operation area!"

“…A tornado?"

Alphonse, and of course Heinrich, couldn't help but tilt their heads at the unexpected news.

-Vroom

Despite the considerable distance, the fierce wind was whistling past their ears.

The massive tornado visible from a distance sucked up all the monsters in its path,

hurling them into the sky.

-Vroom! Vroom!

It was not just a ferocious wind.

-Zap!

Lightning flashed dozens of times per second within the tornado.

If sucked into the tornado, one would be torn by the wind and burnt by the lightning.

The monsters that couldn't withstand the wind and were lifted into the sky would die when slammed back into the ground.

Liana Harriet, me, Olivia, and even Airi.

The five of us were taking preemptive measures at Senkelien, the target of this operation for the Allied Forces.

Although monsters would continue to pour out of the gates, reducing their numbers beforehand would make the operation of the Allied Forces easier.

Summoning a blizzard like last time would only harm the Allied Forces.

That's why this time, we chose to summon a tornado and turn Senkelien into a wasteland.

This place was indeed an outer area of Senkelien but a very important one.

-Kwaaaaa!

-Huh!

Olivia summoned Death Knights to buy time for Liana, who was changing the weather, and block the monsters rushing towards us.

This place was in the middle of a swarm of monsters.

-Slash!

Cutting, cutting, and cutting monsters caught in the Aura Blade covered with blue mana, we held on.

Protecting her until Liana completed her mission.

That was our role.

Harriet also dealt with the approaching monsters using magic, while Airi put the monsters to sleep with her sleep magic, but her combat prowess was also top-notch.

-Vroom vroom!

How much time had passed as we dealt with the waves of monsters?

We could all confirm that another massive storm was occurring in the area opposite the direction where the tornado had formed.

Two tornadoes holding lightning.

"It's done!"

At Liana's shout, I stepped on the accelerator.

-Crash!

As the wave of magical energy erupts, the monsters rushing towards me are simultaneously repelled and engulfed in flames.

"Return! Regroup!"

At those words, Olivia, I, and Airi rush towards Harriet, who is standing beside Liana.

There's no need to kill all the monsters.

The tornado summoned by Liana will take care of that for us.

"Let's go!"

The power cartridges around Harriet's neck emit light, and blue magical lines begin to form all over her body, radiating a blue glow.

She may not be as powerful as Redina.

However, Harriet has mastered the art of casting magic nearly instantaneously.

Mass teleport.

-In a flash!

We've left the operation area.

"I think she might be able to manipulate the weather."

“…That seems likely."

Bertus nods to the report from Saviolin Turner.

As the highest-ranking decision-maker of the Allied Forces, Bertus also had no choice but to be stationed at the base garrison, with a crucial operation looming.

It's the first operation.

That's why it's so important.

As it's the first step in a matter concerning humanity's fate, the Emperor must be personally involved in this situation.

Bertus had already received a report about the situation.

He was speculating that the magic used was either by Harriet de Saint-Owan or the Vampire Lords.

However, this time the report mentioned a tornado, not a blizzard.

Snow and tornadoes.

"Is it Liana's supernatural power rather than magic…?"

"We can't rule out that possibility either."

Somehow, there's an excessively large-scale weather anomaly.

Whether it's magic or supernatural power, they can't tell.

But a massive weather anomaly has appeared in Senkelien.

It's a definite boon.

The Allied Forces have no magician or supernatural capable of such destructive power.

Monsters continue to appear from the Gate.

But the tornado should be cleaning them up right now.

Naturally, they can't advance into Senkelien, which has turned into a living hell.

"When the tornado subsides, we'll advance as quickly as possible."

They can't assume the Demon King's help will always be there. So, they shouldn't include Reinhardt's aid within the scope of the operation.

However, for some reason, Bertus had a feeling that this help would continue until the Gate incident was completely resolved.

'I don't know if I deserve such assistance… '

Bertus covered his face with both hands, letting out a deep sigh.

The crucial first operation, and the tornado sweeps through the area designated as the battlefield.

The Senkelien campaign might end rather anticlimactically.

But if there ever comes a time when the Demon King and the Empire are destined to wage war against each other, what will happen then?

After the Gate incident, would humanity face annihilation instead?

Bertus was already feeling the same kind of fear that Saviolin Turner had felt.

"By the way, how is Ellen's condition…?"

"…"

At Bertus's question, Saviolin Turner's expression turned slightly strange.

"If you're asking about her condition… I wouldn't say it's good, but it doesn't seem to be getting worse."

"…That's a relief. Does the necklace Dettomorian gave her have any effect?"

"I'm not sure about that…"

Saviolin Turner's expression was odd, as if it was awkward to speak about something.

"She's been… raising a cat lately."

"…A cat?"

"Yes, I don't know why, but it definitely seems to be having an effect."

Bertus couldn't understand what Saviolin Turner was talking about.

"Your Majesty, can we deploy 'that weapon' in this operation?"

"Ah…"

Bertus nodded as if understanding what Saviolin Turner was talking about.

"It seems it's not quite ready yet. The Archduke and Adelia are doing their best to expedite the process, but there appear to be many issues since it's not a stable environment. I heard it would be completed before the year ends, but… I'm not sure about the specifics."

"I see…"

"It would be great if it could be completed sooner…"

On one side of Bertus's desk, there was a document titled [Plan for the Development

of Strategic Weapons through the Integration and Application of Mana Automation Machinery and Optimization of Power Stones] placed on the table.

CHAPTER 532

It was two days after the tornado had swept through and subsided near Senkelien.

Before the monsters could pour out again and fill the empty plains, the allied forces had already completed their preparations for the march.

As soon as the weather anomaly had ceased, the allied forces immediately advanced towards Senkelien.

The battle was surprisingly easy.

The allied forces, divided into three large units, attacked Senkelien—which had been reduced to a wasteland after the tornado swept through—from the east, south, and west, as if encircling it.

It wasn't just the monsters that the tornado had reduced.

With the entire city in ruins, the exterior walls and debris of the buildings where the monsters could have hidden were all swept away.

The allied forces only had to face the newly emerging monsters from the conquered city and the powerful monsters that had survived the tornado.

And there weren't many of these powerful monsters. They were swept away like fallen leaves by the vanguard, composed of master-class fighters.

Given Senkelien's three warp gates, one could not say the number of monsters was small.

However, compared to the size of the allied forces, it was pitifully few.

The colossal weapons that had been brought along were installed, but they couldn't fire a single shot due to the quick infiltration of the skirmishers into the city.

In the first place, there was no need to fire. These weapons were designed to cause devastation in the midst of a massive swarm of monsters.

There was no need to shoot at the already devastated horde, and if they did, there was a greater risk of friendly fire.

The allied forces' first offensive operation ended in less than half a day.

Two medium-sized warp gates were taken by the squad led by Ellen Artorious.

Saviolin Turner destroyed the barrier of the large warp gate and caused it to collapse, concluding the conquest of Senkelien.

It was a surprisingly easy conquest.

The number of allied casualties was less than a hundred.

These were casualties, not fatalities.

The number of monsters had been drastically reduced, allowing the elites to quickly enter the field and strike at the warp gates.

Swoosh -

Ellen sheathed her Void Sword while gazing at the ruins of the collapsed warp gate.

Of course, it wasn't over just because the gate was destroyed. There was still work to be done to eliminate the surviving monsters, but they were very few in number.

"Operation complete. Good work, everyone."

“…Yes."

Ellen nodded quietly.

The operation was successfully completed.

Casualties were minimal.

Ellen had some intuition as to whose assistance had brought about this outcome.

She clenched the necklace, steadying her breath.

When she returned, she planned to hug the cat tightly and pet it.

She intended to tell it that everything had gone better than expected.

She wished that everything would continue like this, that every matter would be resolved this easily.

Of course, this would only be possible when that cat, who disappears and reappears suddenly, was at the base.

—---

The allied forces successfully occupied Senkelien.

The high command of the allied forces knew that the large-scale natural disaster had not occurred by coincidence.

A considerable number of commanders in the allied forces believed that it was the empire's hidden power.

Although the battle had ended surprisingly easily, it was a great victory nonetheless.

Their first victory since the expedition began.

Starting from this, they would reclaim all the small and large cities, as well as the capital of the Kingdom of Riselen, and the gate crisis would be over.

There was still a long way to go.

However, there was no reason not to celebrate this first victory.

After the cleanup near Senkelien, a feast was held at the garrison.

There was no reason not to celebrate, as there were hardly any casualties in the battle where a large number of casualties were expected.

Though it was not an excessive amount, the Emperor permitted a certain degree of alcohol consumption.

Songs filled the garrison, sung by soldiers hoping for the complete end of the war,

peace, and the death of the Demon King.

It was natural for such a feast to take place within the Royal Class garrison.

Some of the capable students had a drink or two, and Ranian Sesor played his instrument while intoxicated.

Of course, his skills were not extraordinary, but even in his drunken state, the performance was lively, if not entirely accurate.

-Azahaaaa!

So far, the Allied Forces had fought many battles, but today was the first time they could claim a victory.

So it was only natural for the students to be intoxicated by the sensation of victory.

For the sake of maintaining their sharp senses, or because some didn't believe this was a true victory, a few people didn't dampen the atmosphere today and listened to the songs of victory.

The Allied Forces base was bustling.

Of course, not everyone was drunk, and everyone enjoyed the feast in their own way.

In a corner of the Royal Class garrison's banquet hall.

-Euueuuueung

Some students watched a black kitten twisting its body and rolling around on a pile of blue leaves.

"Is this… alright?"

Ellen looked back and forth between the kitten twisting its body and the unidentified leaves Anna de Gerna had brought, with a worried expression.

"It's fine…”

-Euueung

The kitten, as if intoxicated by something, sniffed the scent of the leaves and rolled around, twisting its body.

As always, the black kitten disappeared somewhere and returned to the Royal Class garrison after the occupation of Senkelien.

The Royal Class students had become accustomed to the kitten, which would disappear for a few days and then reappear, and then disappear again for another few days.

By now, everyone believed that it would return eventually, even if it disappeared for a week or so.

But this time, as soon as Anna de Gerna saw the kitten return, she laid out some mysterious leaves for it and placed the kitten on top.

It had been like that ever since.

The kitten rolled around.

Scarlett, Christina, Adelia, and the other Royal Class students watched the kitten twist its body as if intoxicated by alcohol.

Anna said it wasn't dangerous, even though it looked like it might be.

"Is this what you snuck into the supply list last time?"

"Yeah… It's called Catnip."

When they wondered why she had slipped something strange into the list of essential alchemical supplies.

"It's like a drug for cats…"

"!"

-Ehng

At Anna's words, a shocked Ellen quickly lifted the kitten from the catnip leaves and glared at Anna.

What are you doing to our baby?

That was the thought clearly visible in her eyes.

"A drug…?"

"Just a figure of speech. It's not a real drug."

“…Really?"

Another senior student nodded.

"Right. It shouldn't be harmful to the body. That's what I know too."

"…”

-Ehng

The kitten continued to roll around, still stretched out. It seemed to be completely out of it, as if intoxicated by something, but it certainly looked happy rather than upset.

Ellen hesitantly placed the black kitten back on the pile of leaves.

-Eung

The kitten began rolling around on the catnip leaves once more.

Of course, only the cat itself, who couldn't quite grasp its situation, would know what kind of internal screams it was letting out.

A banquet was also taking place in the Kernstadt Army's command headquarters.

A lavish spread was laid out on the table, celebrating the victory of their strategy.

"Do you think the Gate incident will soon come to an end at this rate?"

"It's easier than expected. I don't understand why we didn't do this earlier."

"If it was only going to amount to this, there was no need for such a large-scale military organization."

"Once this war is over, all those who participated will have their names etched into history."

Heinrich quietly listened to the commanders' conversation.

Alphonse, Louise, and German sat side by side at the clearly designated head seats, with Heinrich seated next to German.

But Heinrich felt a palpable distance between them.

"Milady, how much longer until we reach the next operation area?"

"About a week's journey."

"That's quite close."

"But it's just a small town. The operation should be easier than this one. There's only one small Gate, so perhaps a raiding party could handle it."

German von Schwarz blatantly turned his back towards Heinrich and conversed with Louise.

He was clearly shunning him.

But Heinrich was not someone to be ignored.

"Prince Heinrich, do you not drink alcohol?"

A commander, his face flushed from drunkenness, asked from afar.

"Ah… I don't particularly enjoy it."

"But on a day like today, shouldn't you at least have one drink?"

"One drink, I suppose…"

"To the prince!"

As the man shouted, others raised their glasses and downed their drinks.

Heinrich reluctantly took a small sip from his wine-filled glass.

Heinrich didn't know much about the structure of the Kernstadt Army.

He simply followed the orders of Commander Louise von Schwarz, unaware of the military hierarchy or even the names of the other commanders.

But Heinrich von Schwarz, always at the forefront in battle, sweeping away enemies in the exceptional situation of war, could not have a low status.

The one who killed the most enemies saved those who would have died fighting the monsters.

No matter what the royal family seated next to him thought, Heinrich had the support of the overwhelming majority of soldiers and commanders.

Although they didn't show it, Heinrich couldn't help but notice Alphonse, German, and Louise's expressions harden.

The rolling stone was growing larger.

So, it was inevitable that the lodged stone felt threatened. Heinrich seemed to understand that now.

But why?

Why did they treat him like an eyesore to this extent?

"Youngest one."

“…Yes, sister?"

"You must be tired. Go inside and rest."

Why?

Though the banquet wasn't very enjoyable, did they want to drive him away, as if he didn't deserve to be seated there?

Was the praise for the youngest prince's martial prowess so detestable?

Why?

Why do they hate me so much?

"Yes, sister."

Suppressing the surge of emotions welling up inside him, Heinrich left the banquet at the command headquarters.

The commanders encouraged the departing Heinrich von Schwarz, the hero of the Kernstadt Army, to rest comfortably.

In that nauseating scene where praise and disdain coexisted, Heinrich had no choice but to escape.

The garrison was shrouded in night.

The banquet was in full swing, and although they would stay nearby Senkelien for a few days under the guise of rest, they would soon depart.

Not only in the banquet hall but also in various places of the garrison, soldiers could be seen eating and drinking.

The banquet hall was stifling, and the air felt oppressive.

There was still a little time.

Watching the soldiers carry food and drink, Heinrich approached them.

"Ah, Your Highness!"

"Excuse me for a moment."

Heinrich took a bottle of wine from a crate that was about to be moved into the banquet hall.

Alcohol.

His first time drinking it was at Liana de Grantz's mansion.

After hearing that he had been shocked by Liana for causing a scene, he realized that he had no self-control when it came to alcohol.

Of course, the situation at the time was strange in many ways.

Since his first experience wasn't a good one, Heinrich had no reason to seek alcohol.

But now he was an adult, and no one could say anything about him drinking.

Since he hadn't had a chance to drink since becoming an adult, this was the first time Heinrich had drunk alcohol since that day.

In his own quarters, Heinrich sat on a chair and drank the wine straight from the bottle, without a glass.

Was his past sin so great?

He had no choice but to accept it.

Still, he was doing his best in his position.

It was a long-forgotten event from a very distant past.

Could his brothers still not forgive him?

He was nothing more than an eternal unwelcome guest.

"Hoo…"

Heinrich had no taste for alcohol, so he couldn't tell good wine from bad.

However, he could feel that the wine's taste wasn't particularly good.

The empire still had a surplus, but the state of the wine provided to the commander's quarters showed that it wasn't abundant.

Heinrich knew that this operation had been too easy.

Suspiciously easy.

If they continued to suppress the gates this easily, the complete end of the gate crisis would come soon.

And then what?

What would happen next?

Not only the commanders who treated him like a hero, but also the soldiers were uneasy.

The soldiers returning to Kernstadt would talk about the youngest prince's prowess, and songs about him would be created.

His resentful brothers would hear the songs of their youngest sibling echoing throughout the country.

Your siblings will kill you.

"Heh… Huh…"

Heinrich felt the truth of that statement was not far-fetched.

Seeing his siblings, who strangely despised him, made him think that it could happen.

Despite being siblings.

"…"

He tried to suppress such thoughts, but they kept surging.

Heinrich didn't understand politics.

He didn't understand familial love either.

That's why he didn't understand why he should be hated enough for his family to

want to kill him.

He didn't know love or hate.

He couldn't remember tasting something he'd never eaten, so how could he dislike it?

Heinrich was merely frustrated.

Why do they hate me so much?

Do they really want to kill me?

Heinrich drained the remaining wine and stood up.

If you don't know, ask.

If you're still unsure, find someone who knows.

Heinrich von Schwarz mustered his courage.

Since he didn't know politics, he had to seek someone who did.

Borrowing the courage from the alcohol, Heinrich intended to find someone he hadn't seen in a long time.

Bertus de Gardias.

He would surely still be at the garrison.

CHAPTER 533

The garrison was in the midst of a lively banquet, and naturally, there was a feast at the headquarters as well, where Bertus held overall command.

Ellen Artorius had been invited to the banquet at the headquarters, but she declined, preferring to rest at the barracks. Of course, she was actually playing with her cat at the time.

Heinrich was certainly someone who had the right to meet the Emperor, who was hosting the banquet.

Although the Temple had already fallen into obscurity, he was a classmate of the Emperor and was in charge of one of the very important forces of the Allied Army.

When Heinrich requested an audience, Bertus slipped away from the banquet hall and brought him to the barracks he used when visiting the garrison.

"Have you been drinking? Well, it is a day for celebration, after all…"

At Bertus's words, Heinrich knelt before him and nodded his head.

"Yes, Your Majesty, a little…"

"Relax, it's just the two of us here."

"…Alright."

"Sit down."

Heinrich sat down where Bertus had gestured.

It was in front of the Emperor.

No matter how close humanity was to ruin, the Emperor was still the Emperor.

Heinrich found it quite remarkable that he could summon the Emperor with a single

word and sit face-to-face with him.

If anything, the days of the Temple were even more remarkable.

Bertus opened a bottle of wine, poured some into the glass in front of Heinrich, and then filled his own.

"It's a good day. So, there's really no reason we can't have a drink together, especially since you've already had one."

“…Thank you."

Heinrich took a sip of the wine the Emperor had poured, and a bitter smile crossed his face.

It was the same mediocre wine that had arrived at the Kernstadt Military Headquarters.

Was this all that even the Emperor could drink now?

Bertus also took a sip of the wine and let out a deep sigh.

"It would be nice if things could continue like this."

"Yes, it would."

Bertus's gaze, looking off into the distant mountains, didn't seem to focus on anything in particular.

If only every day were like today.

If only every battle ahead was as easy as today.

But everyone knew that was impossible.

It wasn't the conquest of a large city with a colossal warp gate. In such a case, there would have been casualties on an entirely different scale.

The ease of the first operation may cause the Allied Forces to lower their guard.

But Heinrich wasn't in a position to worry about such things.

All he had to do was fight where he was told to fight. He didn't pay much attention to other strange matters.

It was presumptuous to look beyond what one could do.

Heinrich was now quite adept at understanding his place, unlike before.

Of course, today he had done something quite presumptuous by summoning the Emperor while under the influence of alcohol.

"So, it's not just that you wanted to see my face after a long time."

"…"

"Is there something you're curious about?"

Bertus wondered if Heinrich had come for some other purpose, but Heinrich shook his head.

"There's a problem I don't understand… I thought you might know."

"A problem?"

"What would you do if you were in my situation right now?"

"Hmm?"

Bertus tilted his head at the unexpected question.

"It's such an abstract question, I'm not sure what you're asking?"

"I mean, if you were in my situation right now…"

He couldn't even mention the details of the matter, as it was too cursed to utter.

And so, he could only speak in vague terms.

Because Bertus was smart and knew about politics as much as an emperor.

He felt that by simply thinking, he could get answers he didn't know.

"What do you think is the best choice for me, if you were in my situation right now…? How should I act?"

His brothers hated him.

But his position would continue to grow, and it had nothing to do with Heinrich's intentions.

He couldn't figure out what he should do with this unintended power growing within him. He only knew that staying or leaving the Kernstadt army would be problematic.

Bertus could only answer based on the assumption that he knew Heinrich's situation and the internal affairs of the Kernstadt royal family.

"I don't know these things, and I don't know what the right answer is. It seems like whatever I do will be problematic, and no matter what choice I make, more problems will arise. That's why… the only person I can think of who would know is you."

And so, he committed this rudeness.

Heinrich added softly.

"Well…"

Bertus swirled the red liquid in his wine glass, lost in deep thought.

Bertus had already noticed what Heinrich was asking.

"Do you know what your sister's intentions were, when she transferred you to the Kernstadt army…? Louise von Schwarz, I mean."

"A little, just a little."

"Yes, she intended not to be swayed by the high command. Rather, she wanted to have something to hold and wield."

Heinrich knew that too.

"Though it's ridiculous to discuss what will happen after the war has ended… In any case, you'll undoubtedly become an important figure in the Kernstadt or Schwarz royal family. That's just the natural flow of things."

"…Yeah."

"I don't know what you should do. First of all, I don't know what you want. I don't know what you should do, but I think I have a rough idea of what might happen to you."

"What will happen… to me?"

"Yes."

Bertus took a sip of his wine, quietly looking at Heinrich.

"Your siblings will probably try to kill you. Whether it's during the war or after."

At those words, Heinrich's eyes widened.

He didn't know who sent the letter, but he knew it wasn't Bertus.

However, Bertus was giving the same answer as the anonymous letter.

"Why… Why do they have to go that far? What did I do so wrong? I…"

"Heinrich, don't get angry and listen."

Bertus, having finished his wine, breathed out heavily and quietly looked at Heinrich.

"You might be a bastard child."

If Charlotte de Gardias knew something, it was natural for Bertus de Gardias to know it too.

Heinrich could only stare blankly at Bertus with wide eyes, at his words.

"That's… That's impossible… Don't lie. Stop lying."

That's why Heinrich had no choice but to deny Bertus's cruel suspicion with

trembling lips.

"I said it's a possibility, not a fact."

"Yeah, so. That's not why I came to you, to hear such an absurd story…"

"You know it too."

Bertus spoke with a stern expression.

"If this is true, it would explain all the hatred you've received."

"…"

Hatred, contempt, and loathing beyond measure.

Although it was only a possibility, if it were true, he could understand and accept the environment he was in.

Heinrich could only stare blankly at his glass with a stern expression.

Heinrich stumbled out of the headquarters, trudging along.

Bastard.

A word he had never thought about in his life had become lodged in his mind, refusing to disappear.

Bertus had only mentioned it as a possibility, not stating it as a fact.

But Heinrich felt that the puzzle pieces in his mind were starting to fit together.

Why he had awakened his superpowers in a childhood he couldn't remember, under immense stress.

Why his siblings had died in the fires he had created in his childhood.

Why he had to go to the temple at the tender age of eight, instead of the Kernstadt

Royal Academy.

Why even now, they looked at him with disdain, as if he were a repulsive war hero, constantly ignoring and belittling him.

Was it not an accident, but a murder he had committed unknowingly in his childhood?

Was it merely the fact that a bastard had risen to prominence in the Schwarz royal family, and that it was difficult to accept him since he had devoured two of their siblings?

If so, why?

Why not kill him when such an accident occurred?

Why did they keep him alive and banish him to the temple?

The cold gazes of his siblings and parents, memories of his childhood that he barely remembered, began to resurface, albeit faintly.

Had he not been hated after the accident, but from the very beginning?

Or had it been the hatred of his siblings that turned him into a supernatural?

Was the root of his supernatural power the abuse from his siblings, dating back to a time he couldn't even remember?

Heinrich walked through the bustling allied territory, staggering back to the Kernstadt barracks.

Before he knew it, he heard the sound of salutes and cheers of encouragement, directed at him as he approached the Kernstadt military base.

Usually, he would have waved back with a smile, but Heinrich did not have the energy for that now.

'So… what am I supposed to do?'

If it was confirmed that he was a bastard, it was highly likely that the rumors of the

Schwarz siblings wanting to kill him were true.

It would undoubtedly happen after the war, and there was no guarantee that it wouldn't happen during the ongoing conflict.

'If you ask me to protect you, I can do that.'

Bertus had told Heinrich.

'But it's the matter of retrieving the recruit that Louise von Schwarz took, so she'll probably resist. I'd be overturning her explicit decision.'

'Really…?'

'She might doubt my intentions. It's a plausible situation. It's only natural for you to become a war hero, and your presence, while not quite as much as Ellen, is still significant. She could say I'm trying to use you for some ulterior motive. And even if I don't have that intention, she can still make that claim. I'd be handing over the pretext of meddling in internal affairs to them.'

The Emperor's protection was available.

But in that case, the Emperor would have to bear a considerable burden.

'And it would most likely put your life in even greater danger.'

'…I suppose so.'

'Staying in the Kernstadt army is also difficult, as you'd be constantly exposed to danger… And if you insist on staying at the temple's garrison, you'll be suspected of having ulterior motives of your own… Hmm. Complicated.'

Bastard.

If that word was true, there was no path for Heinrich but death.

His siblings were trying to kill him.

Even with the Emperor's protection, death was inevitable; staying in the Kernstadt army would also lead to death.

As long as he belonged to this alliance, and as long as Heinrich's position remained unchanged, it was clear that one day his siblings would try to kill him.

"So, what should I do?"

"Heinrich."

"Yes?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?"

Bertus shrugged his shoulders.

"To live, you have to kill."

"…"

"We're killing monsters because we want to live, right? What's the difference?"

"…"

"Of course, if all the Kernstadt royals die except for you, there will be great chaos. That's why I don't wish for that situation. Chaos in the alliance is as disastrous as your death."

If Heinrich were to kill the royals plotting against him to survive, it would cause great chaos within the alliance.

"But to survive, you have to do something, whatever it is."

Bertus said he couldn't help Heinrich himself, but he could keep his mouth shut.

This army too was gathered by the will of humanity to live.

So, if Heinrich wanted to live, he had to do something.

Was he really an illegitimate child?

As the anonymous letter stated, and as Bertus predicted.

Were his siblings really trying to kill him?

Did he have to kill his siblings to live?

He didn't want to be killed, nor did he want to kill.

He just wanted to be treated like a brother.

But the situation was such that he couldn't help it.

This shouldn't have happened for just one reason.

Heinrich arrived at the Kernstadt army headquarters, walking aimlessly.

The banquet was still in full swing, and the sounds of boisterous chatter flowed from within the banquet tent.

He didn't want to see anyone inside, no matter who it was.

Heinrich tried to go around to the back of the headquarters and return to his own tent.

He didn't know what he had to do next.

Nothing was certain yet, so he had no plans.

No, he even thought it might be better to be killed.

"Where have you been?"

But behind the headquarters, Heinrich had no choice but to turn at the sound of someone calling him.

"Brother."

The eldest son and the second heir to the Schwarz royal family.

German von Schwarz. And the second son, Alphonse von Schwarz.

Whether they were out to get some air or had some separate conversation, the two

were talking outside the headquarters.

Alphonse was the type to pick a fight openly, but German von Schwarz treated him as if he was barely there.

"I went to the general headquarters."

"What for?"

It was a question from German that seemed almost like an interrogation.

Because he was an illegitimate child.

Is that why he was treated like this?

Because his bloodline was only half as good as the others, he had to endure these harsh questions.

Was it because he was considered less than others, and had to acknowledge such a person as a family member, that they always looked at him with such cold and stiff expressions?

On one side, there was disregard; on the other, contempt.

"I went to see a friend."

"Which friend are you talking about?"

"Who else but His Majesty the Emperor?"

In the general headquarters, the only one who could be called friends was only Bertus.

When the word "Emperor" was mentioned casually, Alphonse von Schwarz began to laugh maliciously.

"Wow, our youngest is amazing. Are you boasting about being friends with the Emperor now?"

Heinrich glared at the blatant mockery.

"I don't think so, but it seems that His Majesty the Emperor thinks that way."

“…Huh."

At Heinrich's seemingly mocking response, Alphonse's expression hardened.

It seemed he hadn't expected Heinrich, who always listened silently, to respond like this.

"You've become quite arrogant, little brother."

It was German von Schwarz who spoke.

"It's true that you are an important asset, but you fundamentally belong to the Schwarz royal family. Although you claim to be friends, the decision to personally visit the Emperor should be made after consulting with me or our older sister."

He was saying that every step Heinrich took should be reported to them.

As long as Heinrich belonged to the Schwarz royal family, all his actions could have political implications, so he should be cautious.

That statement in itself was correct.

But is it only at times like this that they treat him like a brother?

And, going to ask them whether they want to kill him or not, would it even be possible to consult with them?

"Don't act recklessly. Even on a good day, as a royal, you must maintain proper conduct. If you don't want to attract unnecessary misunderstandings, refrain from such behavior."

Misunderstandings.

What kind of misunderstandings?

It's them who are guarding against him without any thought.

German's cold words, and Alphonse's sneering attitude.

As if their words were finished, they both averted their gaze from Heinrich altogether.

They had drunk alcohol.

And, Heinrich wanted to know.

Heinrich stared at his brothers with a determined expression.

"Brothers."

"There's nothing more to say. Go in…”

"Am I a bastard?"

"!"

"What?"

He wanted to confirm if the possibility he had heard was true.

CHAPTER 534

Am I a Bastard?

Upon hearing Heinrich's bombshell of a question, the brothers remained silent with their eyes wide open for a long while.

Then, German von Schwarz approached Heinrich slowly, glaring down at him with bulging eyes.

"Where did you hear such nonsense? Surely, the Emperor didn't say that?"

If the source of the information was the Emperor, German seemed ready to march straight to the Allied Command headquarters to dispute it.

Heinrich knew that what he said was a grave issue, and it was certainly not something to be mentioned within the Kernstadt garrison.

But the frustration and sadness were unbearable, and he couldn't remain silent.

"When I see how you treat me, I can't help but doubt whether that's true."

"No, I can't help but doubt."

"Is it such a great sin to wish for a single word of warmth?"

"But no matter what I do, what field I excel in, or what tasks I undertake, you always treat me like this, so I wonder if I truly am your blood brother…"

Smack!

Before he could finish, German von Schwarz grabbed Heinrich by the collar.

"There is a time and place for words."

German's eyes were ablaze with anger.

"Do you really think this is an appropriate place to discuss such a topic?"

This was the Kernstadt military headquarters, where a banquet was underway.

It was dangerous and foolish to bring up the topic of illegitimacy when someone might be listening.

Furthermore, the youngest prince, who had garnered massive support within the Kernstadt military, discussing the subject of illegitimacy could plunge the military into a great shock, whether it was true or not.

"I suppose your fancy academy didn't teach you that, huh?"

Heinrich stared directly into German's furious eyes.

"The academy is a place where commoners and nobles study together. How could I learn something like that there?"

“…What?"

"And you still can't say that it's not true, can you?"

German's expression froze at Heinrich's now icy tone.

"Brother, just tell me."

"…”

"It seems like you already know, anyway."

Alphonse, who had been watching the scene, approached Heinrich with his usual lazy tone.

Then, he whispered into Heinrich's ear.

So that no one else could hear, so that only Heinrich could hear.

"You are a bastard, little brother."

"…”

"So, I hope you now understand your place."

Heinrich stared at Alphonse von Schwarz with a stern expression.

"We were never meant to converse as equals. Do you understand how uncomfortable and unpleasant we have been until now?"

"You get it now, don't you?"

"We dislike you because you are either incompetent or too competent."

"That's our position."

"So, stop making that disgusting expression as if you're upset and sad for being treated like a brother, as if you're wronged somehow."

"Our origins are different. We were never siblings to begin with."

"Know your place, bastard Heinrich. Do you understand now?"

"Hey, look at his eyes. What are you going to do with those fancy abilities of yours?"

"…"

"Are you planning to kill me like you did Cain and Samuel?"

"…What?"

Heinrich's heart felt shattered as he looked at Alphonse mentioning the two royal family members who died in accidents.

Seeing Alphonse trying to cross the line, even German held him back.

"Alphonse, stop it. Are you drunk?"

"No, but this bastard's eyes are so arrogant."

Despite Heinrich's disapproving gaze, which seemed to already have twisted into a harsh judgment, Alphonse approached him once more, ignoring his brother's restraint.

"Go on, you filthy bastard. Try it. Are the two of them not enough to bring down the royal family that you need a third?"

-Smack!

"Ugh!"

Alphonse could no longer continue speaking.

This wasn't something German would do.

Out of nowhere, Louise von Schwarz strode forward and slapped Alphonse across the face.

"Si, sister…"

Alphonse's eyes filled with terror, and soon, he began to step back hesitantly.

"You're discussing matters that should not be discussed in a place where they should not be discussed. All three of you. Were the people of the Schwarz royal family really behaving so shamelessly and without dignity?"

Just like Alphonse, German was also frozen in fear.

Louise's icy stare.

Under the Swordmaster's intimidating presence, everyone was left breathless.

No one dared to speak up in response to Louise's words. Alphonse von Schwarz was pale-faced upon her arrival as well.

But Heinrich was different.

Heinrich stared straight at Louise von Schwarz.

"Do I, a bastard who can't even receive acknowledgment from my brothers, have any dignity or face to protect?"

"What?"

Louise von Schwarz's eyebrows narrowed at the defiance in Heinrich's growl.

"Where is the decorum that I'm supposed to protect?"

Alphonse and German were terrified.

The rightful heir and eldest daughter of the royal family.

They were shocked to see Heinrich openly defy Louise von Schwarz's words.

A bastard like him had no dignity or honor to protect.

Louise von Schwarz looked at Heinrich coldly as if to question whether it made sense to insist on protecting it after having never treated him royally.

"Enough. There's nothing more to gain from this conversation. There will come an appropriate time and day to settle this matter."

Louise seemed reluctant to continue the discussion.

"Will that time ever come?"

"What did you say?"

"I asked if that time will ever come."

Heinrich's words further hardened Louise's expression.

"Will you have this conversation with me before this war ends? As it is now, everyone secretly despises me as a bastard and doesn't even treat me as a proper human being. When will that day come…?"

"Youngest."

Louise interrupted Heinrich's words and coldly spoke as she gripped his shoulder.

"Stop acting worse than a bastard."

"…"

Actions that not even a bastard would do.

Arguing over an unsuitable subject with his brothers near the military headquarters.

Regardless of whether they were royalty or not, Heinrich could only grit his teeth at the remark that it was a lowly act.

It was a conversation that could only bring chaos to everyone. They were discussing an issue that shouldn't spread at a place where it could potentially reach the entire army.

Worse than a bastard's actions.

Those words pierced Heinrich's heart.

Louise looked at her frozen younger brother Heinrich and her two other brothers as well.

"Alcohol can be good…"

Alcohol.

It was usually absent, but it was present today.

"But it seems to be bad for you guys, so don't touch it from now on."

With those words, Louise left for the command post.

German and Alphonse, no longer speaking to Heinrich, quietly returned to their own quarters.

Heinrich stood motionless in the same spot for quite some time.

After the feast ended, late into the night.

Not all the troops were asleep. Even with the ongoing festivities, monsters could still appear near Senkelien, so a few of them remained awake, guarding the area throughout the deep night.

The area near the Kernstadt military headquarters, where a somewhat ominous commotion had occurred, grew quiet as if the previous revelry had never happened.

Yet, there was still one tent with its fire burning.

"My lady, should we not take action?"

"I don't know where he heard that he's a bastard, but we can't leave things like this."

Alphonse and German sought out Commander Louise's tent in the middle of the night.

Louise sat on a makeshift bed, listening to their story.

"So, the youngest may try to kill us, is that it?"

"It would be strange if he didn't."

"It's certain he won't think of us as brothers now that he knows the truth, and he'll surely try some sort of scheme."

"Yes, why did you confirm his suspicions when you knew he might take drastic measures?"

"Huh? That… well…”

"You could've just said no to such an absurd question. Why did you both bring about this crisis by failing to say we're brothers?"

At Louise's gaze, both Alphonse and German fell silent.

"Crisis, you say? Yes, it's a crisis. Unable to say a few kind words to a sibling with the power to annihilate an entire army with a single gesture. It seems like a crisis, given that you've ended up in this mess by trying to belittle and shun him."

Neither Alphonse nor German had any words to say in the face of the situation.

"Isn't your foolishness already a crisis for the Schwarzs royal family?"

"…”

"…"

If they had treated Heinrich warmly, he wouldn't have felt such sorrow.

But it was just their pride.

Not wanting to treat a bastard like a brother, their pride and inferiority complex ruined everything.

Heinrich von Schwarzs now knew that he was a bastard and that those he wanted to believe were his siblings saw him as inferior to everyone else.

The current situation of the Kernstadt army was one where no one knew what sudden actions Heinrich might take.

Though she hadn't personally intervened, as the commander, the person in charge of the military, and the successor to Kernstadt, Louise von Schwarzs had to take responsibility for the mess her foolish brothers had created.

"You think the Emperor is the source of this information?"

“…Yes, my lady."

"He said he met the Emperor at the military headquarters. Boasting about being friends with the Emperor, how infuriating…”

Alphonse tried to add a useless comment, but when Louise glared at him, he closed his mouth.

Louise von Schwarzs couldn't know what conversation took place between the Emperor and Heinrich.

But Heinrich, after meeting the Emperor, couldn't help but ask if he was a bastard.

Even without hearing the conversation, it was clear what they had discussed.

"I'll have to meet the Emperor."

Louise's stern expression seemed to suggest she wanted to chew up and spit out the Emperor.

But regardless of where he had gotten the clue, the direct cause of the problem was the straightforward response from German and Alphonse.

"Don't cause any more trouble before discussing it with me."

"Yes."

"Yes, my lady."

Action had to be taken.

Heinrich and the Schwarz royal family had crossed an irreversible river.

Louise's plan to raise the prestige of the Kernstadt army through Heinrich, exploit it, and ultimately have the Schwarz royal family take the place of the Gardias imperial family after the war, had failed.

"I can't stand the sight of you both. Get out of my sight."

"…"

"…"

Louise silently glared at the retreating backs of the brothers, who had been given a brief expulsion order.

'The Emperor… '

Bertus de Gardias.

Louise never imagined she would feel the Emperor's influence in such a place, in such a manner.

The division within the Schwarz royal family.

Had they not fallen victim to the Emperor's schemes instead?

To be precise, it was almost as if they were manipulated by the stupidity of the two brothers other than herself, and Heinrich's recklessness.

If they could be predicted to be so reckless and foolish after being born out of wedlock, was there anything left in the Schwarz royal family that the empire hadn't grasped?

Louise couldn't shake off such thoughts.

Heinrich sat on his barracks bed.

The night was deep, but he couldn't sleep.

How could he sleep peacefully after hearing such a story?

A bastard.

When Bertus told him the story, he had no choice but to admit there was some possibility, but deep down, he denied it.

There was no way.

It was an absurd story. That's what he couldn't help but think.

But that absurdity turned out to be true.

When he finally faced the hidden contempt and disdain in their eyes, Heinrich felt suffocated.

Everything until now.

That's why it was like that.

The origin of the siblings' inexplicable alienation and hatred was rooted there.

"Heh…”

Heinrich let out a hollow laugh.

Yes, a bastard had killed two members of the royal family.

It was rather fortunate that he was exiled to the temple rather than being killed outright. It was clear that the Schwarz royal family was still a magnanimous group.

Although they hated him, it wasn't enough to end it with hatred alone.

Now that he knew the truth, Heinrich could feel how much his non-brothers had to endure.

They must have seen their actions of openly ignoring and despising him as unavoidable. It was fortunate that they only did that much.

However.

Your siblings will kill you.

Now he couldn't help but feel the reality of that message.

A bastard.

The position of a bastard was growing, and eventually, it would even surpass Louise von Schwarz's influence.

They wouldn't stand by and watch it happen forever, so they would try to dispose of him when the time was right.

They didn’t know how he knew, but Heinrich and his brothers had shared a conversation they shouldn't have.

Heinrich knew he was a bastard.

His brothers had told him he was a bastard.

So, he sensed that he would face another phase different from before.

His siblings would try to kill Heinrich, not knowing what actions he would take.

When would it be?

It could be tonight, or tomorrow, or during a later operation. Even knowing the date, he didn't know the method. It could be poisoning, assassination, or a disguised death

during an operation.

Should he just sit still like this?

While his brothers might try to kill him?

As Bertus said.

To survive, he had to kill.

It was clear that his brothers would try to kill him, so he had to kill his brothers.

But could he really do that?

In this desperate situation, even if it's for the sake of survival, is it really the right choice to kill one's own siblings in a war that determines the fate of humanity?

Heinrich sat motionless in the darkness of his tent.

This place was far too vulnerable.

No matter how thick the tent's fabric, it could be easily cut through by a blade, and unlike Ellen's tent, Heinrich's had no locks or security measures. Most tents were like this, so there was no room for complaints.

From the outset, with monsters as the enemy instead of humans, the safety of the tents themselves held little meaning. This wasn't a war with assassins or spies running rampant.

The entire garrison was an all-too-ideal environment for night prowlers, since monsters didn't conduct ambushes.

"Hey."

"…!"

Just like right now.

"Who, who are you!"

A man clad in a black robe, who had not been there moments ago, suddenly appeared in the center of the tent.

Heinrich summoned a flame in his right hand, his eyes wide in surprise.

Were they acting so quickly?

Even so, right now?

As Heinrich hesitated between attacking and fleeing, the robed man pulled off his hood.

He wasn't an assassin.

"Don't worry. It's me."

"You… you are… who are you?"

But he was something far worse than an assassin.

Despite his reassurances, Heinrich was gripped by a fear that felt like his heart would burst.

"Re, Re… Reinhardt…?"

"Did you receive the letter well?"

Upon the appearance of the demon king, Heinrich's eyes widened in shock.

"Yo, you… you can't be… you're?"

"Yeah, we're friends, aren't we?"

Reinhardt grinned and shrugged his shoulders.

"Aren't we?"

Somehow, it seemed as if nothing had changed from before.

That's what Heinrich thought.

"Uh… oh… this is troubling."

However, Reinhardt's condition seemed a bit strange, as if he had been drinking alcohol or something.

CHAPTER 535

Heinrich was frozen in place as he realized that Reinhardt had somehow entered his tent.

The Demon King was a curse upon humanity.

Although Heinrich found it hard to believe that Reinhardt, the object of the world's hatred, was the same being as the Demon King, it was not untrue.

Reinhardt was the Demon King.

And the Demon King was behind all of this.

Knowing this, Heinrich could not help but be confused.

How, in this moment, before him, and as the sender of the letter, could Reinhardt be the Demon King?

"It must be a thorn in your side," Reinhardt bluntly said, as if knowing the entire situation.

"We don't have much time to talk, so I'll keep it short."

"You know that if you die here, it's a problem, and if you kill someone, it's also a problem, right?"

"Follow me."

"Once you do, I'll explain everything step by step."

"What has happened so far."

"What we will do next."

"And what you can do about it."

They didn't have the luxury of a lengthy conversation, nor could they afford it.

Heinrich could not help but freeze when faced with Reinhardt, someone he never thought he would see again.

How did Reinhardt know he would be killed? Had he been watching him? And where had he heard about the illegitimate child?

But Reinhardt had appeared after Heinrich confirmed he was indeed a bastard.

As if he had been waiting for this moment.

The moment when Heinrich sensed he had no place in the coalition forces and would soon be assassinated, Reinhardt appeared and offered his hand.

To leave the coalition forces.

Heinrich hadn't thought the day would come when he would face Reinhardt again.

But he had imagined it.

Amidst the countless deaths and the tragic desolation created by the Gate Incident.

Why did you do all this?

Did you hate humanity that much?

Even if humans destroyed your world, was this really necessary?

I may not know you well, but the Reinhardt I saw wasn't like this.

Was everything just a mask and a lie?

Did you hide your thirst for revenge behind that mask?

But when Reinhardt appeared before him, Heinrich could not ask anything.

Not even a thought of becoming humanity's hero by killing the Demon King crossed his mind.

He could not think of anything other than the topic Reinhardt had brought up.

Following Reinhardt would mean survival.

Reinhardt's expression suggested there was a reason for everything.

Despite still not knowing much about Reinhardt, Heinrich realized one thing.

The Reinhardt of the Temple.

He may have been a ruffian, but he was never a villain.

Heinrich sensed that this persona was nothing but the truth.

Had the gods' choice been wrong?

He didn't know, but there must have been a reason that things had turned out this way.

He had come to accept that his siblings would eventually try to kill him.

Thus, there was no place for him in the Kernstadt Army.

As Bertus had said, even as a member of the High Command, he couldn't escape the influence of the Kernstadt Army.

As long as his origin as a member of the Schwarz royal family and the fact that he was a bastard remained unchanged.

His siblings would eventually try to exclude him.

That now felt like an established fact to Heinrich.

By taking the Demon King's hand, he would become a traitor to humanity.

For some reason, there were already three people who had betrayed humanity and sided with the Demon King.

Olivia Lanze, Harriet de Saint Owan, Liana de Grantz.

To these three names is added Heinrich von Schwarz.

Heinrich knows well the treatment that the Duke of Saint Owan, who is more dedicated to the war than anyone, receives.

If he were to side with the Demon King, and if it were revealed that he had sided with the Demon King, the royal family of Schwarz would be treated the same as the Saint Owan ducal family.

A family with a traitor among their bloodline.

The prestige of the Schwarz royal family would plummet.

Revenge.

Could there be a better revenge against the brothers who have scorned and ignored him for being a bastard?

Regardless of what they dream, wouldn't the fall of the royal family's image due to the betrayal of a bastard be the surest revenge for the neglect and disdain Heinrich has endured thus far?

"…"

Heinrich stares at Reinhardt, who waits silently for his answer.

By siding with the Demon King, he would first guarantee his own survival and deliver a tremendous sense of humiliation to his siblings, who have despised him for being a bastard and who value honor more than life.

The political blow that the Schwarz royal family would face just by having a traitor among them would be immense.

It would be laughable to reveal the truth that Heinrich von Schwarz was not a legitimate child but a bastard. They've been using him so far for their benefit, after all.

"I won't rush you to decide. It's not a matter to decide hastily."

Reinhardt leans against one of the pillars of the tent and crosses his arms, falling

silent.

It's unclear whether he doesn't think of attacking or if he's confident he can handle it if attacked.

Reinhardt gives Heinrich time to ponder.

He begins to think that following the Demon King might be the right choice.

If there's some unavoidable circumstance for Reinhardt, and if it's valid.

If it's not out of malice, but a series of events that couldn't be helped.

Reinhardt is only trying to save Heinrich's life by coming into enemy territory.

Even though they weren't that close, he's trying to save him.

If that goodwill is true, there's no reason not to join hands with the Demon King.

If staying with the allied forces only increases the danger, he should do something else elsewhere, and he can also take revenge on the Schwarz royal family who have shunned him.

However.

The royal family is the royal family.

And the people are the people.

The Schwarz royal family and Kernstadt Army make up a large part of the allied forces.

The Duke of Saint Owan is being pointed at because of his traitorous daughter, receiving no recognition for his dedication and serving the army as if it were a punishment.

The mages of Saint Owan Duchy were also treated the same way.

The people must bear the sins of their ruler's family.

If it becomes known that Heinrich sided with the Demon King, not only the Schwarz royal family but also the entire Kernstadt Army would become sinners.

Regardless of the Demon King's situation, that would be a story only known to a few.

The Kernstadt Army would also receive the same treatment as the Duke of Saint Owan and his mages.

This would soon lead to a decline in morale, beyond that, a division among the allied forces. There would be countless people within the Kernstadt Army shaking with immense feelings of betrayal.

It might not be known that he sided with the Demon King, but rather, that he deserted.

Even so, the decline in morale would be inevitable.

Heinrich is a hero of the Kernstadt Army.

Like Ellen, a hero has value simply by existing.

There are burdens to bear.

Even if one's own siblings seek to kill them, even if such acts are driven by shortsightedness.

One cannot betray others.

One cannot abandon those who have faith in them, those who find hope in them.

Heinrich does not ask Reinhardt many questions.

There were many inquiries, but they have become meaningless.

Reinhardt has come to save him.

Then, what choice will he make?

"As you know, a lot has changed since then."

"…"

"I'm not the stepping stone you used to mock anymore."

At the somewhat arrogant remark, Reinhardt chuckles.

"Yeah, you're not that anymore."

Heinrich can now return the words Reinhardt once used to ridicule him.

That much time has passed.

He is no longer a stepping stone but now possesses a power capable of setting the mountains ablaze.

As his power has grown stronger, some fear Heinrich while others find hope in him.

"So, my backside is no longer light enough to be swayed by what you say, like it used to be."

"Well, you've certainly grown beyond your station."

Reinhardt, who returns a malicious reply with one laden with malice, seems to Heinrich no different than before.

"I can't go. I'll handle my own affairs."

At that answer, Reinhardt quietly stares into Heinrich's eyes.

"Even if you die, even if you kill, it's a problem. Do you understand me properly?"

"I understand."

It's a problem if he's killed.

It's a problem if he kills.

He will handle his own affairs.

In the end, every matter brings forth problems.

It's a problem if he's killed; it's a problem if he kills.

There will be problems even if he follows the Demon King.

If everything is a problem, then Heinrich merely chooses one problem.

"Well, if that's your choice, there's nothing I can do."

If it were the old Reinhardt, he would have used force if things didn't go as planned.

"You've changed a bit too, haven't you?"

Heinrich laughs at the sarcastic remark, and Reinhardt chuckles as well.

"Did you think it was just you?"

Reinhardt returns the sarcasm with sarcasm.

And in this desperate situation, facing Reinhardt was surprising but also raised a question.

It was different from the truth, and quite out of the blue.

“…By any chance, have you been drinking?"

Reinhardt seemed to sway and struggle to maintain his composure in the darkness.

Heinrich had a strange feeling about it.

In response to Heinrich's question, Reinhardt shakes his head.

"Not alcohol, but… something similar… Anyway, never mind."

Reinhardt seems to try to regain his composure, his eyes wide open.

"Live, if you can."

With those words, Reinhardt disappears into the darkness. Heinrich couldn't tell how he had vanished.

"…"

Reinhardt had appeared suddenly and disappeared just as suddenly.

Only then did Heinrich realize that he had experienced something unbelievable.

The Demon King had come looking for him.

He had offered help and had been refused.

Was this something that had really happened?

Heinrich couldn't help but be stunned for a while.

A place far from the coalition forces' base. The reconnaissance team doesn't come this far.

"How did it go?"

"He said he would handle it himself."

"Hmm… What does he mean by that?"

"I don't know."

Sarkegaar narrows his brow at my reply after escaping the base.

I was inebriated and disoriented at the Royal-class garrison due to catnip, and Sarkegaar reported that something had happened.

It was an indescribable hellish feeling.

It was good, but so good that it made me feel eerie.

Who would have thought that in my lifetime, I'd get drunk on catnip? And why on earth did that crazy Anna request such a thing to be supplied to the garrison?

Anyway.

The story had already surfaced, and the situation was riding a rapid current.

And, Heinrich had rejected my offer to join forces.

I had worried about how to deal with him if he tried to attack, but fortunately, that didn't happen.

Heinrich, whom I had seen with my own eyes, had changed.

Gone was the image of the youngest prince of Kernstadt, who was once arrogant, cheeky, and rude.

Whether it was the experiences he had been through that changed him or some other catalyst, I didn't know.

If it had been just an arrogant choice, I would have used forceful means.

Heinrich seemed to think about others besides himself.

He seemed to believe that he had a role to play in the coalition forces.

I don't know if Heinrich's choice was just a matter of convenience or something more.

But I guess I can handle whatever happens from now on.

Don't do anything.

The advice of the oracle was that my actions would be meaningless, as Heinrich would refuse my help even if I tried to help him.

"What will you do?"

At Sarkegaar's question, I crossed my arms.

Our relationship was already firmly twisted.

Heinrich had confirmed that he was an illegitimate child, and his siblings knew it too, so their mutual fear would soon turn into aggression.

Heinrich could die, or he might end up killing someone else.

Was the division of the coalition forces inevitable?

Should I have forced Heinrich to come with me?

I don't know.

But Heinrich had changed.

He made decisions as someone who could think about more than just surviving.

But would that change guarantee Heinrich's survival?

There were variables, but they were too small to change the environment.

As long as Heinrich stayed with the coalition forces, those variables couldn't prevent what was going to happen.

No, there could be other incidents where Heinrich kills his brothers, and that would eventually cause more problems.

If Heinrich survives and his other siblings die, the chaos in the coalition forces will unfold as planned.

Is it right to stand by and watch?

I understand the meaning of the oracle's advice not to do anything.

It meant that Heinrich would refuse my help.

Then another piece of advice.

How did Heinrich survive?

That vague advice.

I still don't know what that means.

What does that mean?

“…Let's watch for now."

We must avoid extreme situations.

Heinrich rejected my help, but I will continue to monitor the situation.

Three days after the occupation of Senkelien.

The coalition forces were reorganizing for their next advance, while revising their future plans.

The path to the next destination was again affected by abnormal weather, and word had already reached the headquarters that the monsters had been nearly annihilated.

Because of these unknown factors, the coalition forces didn't have to deploy troops for forward reconnaissance, scouting, or extermination as they used to.

Thus, a significant number of troops could conserve their strength.

The issue of battle fatigue was also a critical matter for maintaining the military's combat power.

Thanks to the cooperation of the Demon King, the alliance's military forces received significant assistance in maintaining their strength.

Among those who benefited from this were Saviolin Turner and Ellen Artorius, not to mention the supernaturals who originated from the Temple.

As a result, Heinrich von Schwarz hadn't received any requests for deployment since the occupation of Senkelien and was taking a break.

But could this really be considered a break for Heinrich von Schwarz?

He had discovered the unwanted truth that he was an illegitimate child.

And he had encountered a being who should never have been in that place.

As relations with his siblings grew strained, a tense atmosphere persisted like walking on thin ice.

Nevertheless, Heinrich had been doing his best to be as courteous as possible to his siblings. While they maintained cold, disdainful, or sarcastic attitudes, there had still been some conversation.

But the silence that flowed between the siblings was brutal.

They knew amongst themselves.

That a showdown was imminent.

It all started with Louise von Schwarz.

Five days after the occupation of Senkelien.

Just before the march, Louise von Schwarz gathered all her brothers.

"The safety of the surrounding area of Senkelien has been 'definitely' secured. Let's look around since the march will begin on such a day."

"…"

"There are matters we need to discuss as well."

At Louise's words directed towards him, Heinrich nodded.

They discussed a topic that was difficult to mention casually.

Heinrich nodded with a stern expression.

There were definitely no monsters near Senkelien.

Although there were no people left to rebuild the city, the reduction in warp gates had its own meaning.

Without any guards or escort forces, the brothers of the Schwarz royal family rode

horses and inspected the area around Senkelien.

It was more of a stroll than an inspection.

In fact, the purpose wasn't that important. They had just come out to discuss matters they couldn't in a place with many ears.

Would it really be just a conversation?

Heinrich pictured it in his head.

While the other brothers could also handle weapons, it didn't hold much significance to Heinrich.

The real threat was Louise von Schwarz.

An overwhelming genius with five-star capabilities, and the leader of the Kernstadt Royal Knights.

Moreover, she had already reached the master class a long time ago.

Could he handle her if she tried to kill him?

Heinrich knew that Louise von Schwarz wasn't afraid to step onto the battlefield and wield her sword.

Having watched Ellen and Saviolin Turner fight several times, he knew well how threatening a master class combatant could be.

Heinrich's physical abilities weren't that high.

If Louise von Schwarz were to draw her sword and try to kill him, she could easily do so.

However, there were problems after that.

How would they explain the sudden death of Heinrich von Schwarz, and how would they solve the issues arising from it, including the drop in morale?

A life that's too important doesn't disappear easily.

That's why his brothers couldn't easily harm him.

So there was little chance that Louise would try to kill him during their walk.

The area around Senkelien had already been cleared.

The excuse that monsters ambushed and killed Heinrich wouldn't be accepted.

So Louise von Schwarz couldn't take action.

It might be different in another place or in another way, but not today.

However, despite saying they would talk, Louise von Schwarz was merely riding the horse from the front, not uttering a single word.

Alphonse and German were also silent, waiting for their sister to speak first.

How long had they traveled in silence?

"…?"

At the entrance of a ruined building, Louise got off the horse.

"Get down."

It was a spacious building, likely once used as a farmhouse's storage.

Heinrich and the other brothers were confused, as nothing had been discussed beforehand.

With a stern expression, Heinrich stared at the dark entrance of the warehouse.

He thought it wouldn't happen.

Was she willing to risk any interference?

Did she consider him that much of a threat?

Heinrich quietly observed his brothers getting off their horses with meaningful smiles.

“Didn't I tell you to get down?”

Louise stared coldly at Heinrich.

“…Yes.”

If a fight were to break out, how and where would it start?

Feeling his heart pounding, Heinrich got off the horse.

Should he have followed Reinhardt?

Such thoughts were pointless now.

Regretting not having acted sooner was simply foolish.

To survive, must he kill?

If so, wouldn't it be better to strike first?

He had to subdue Louise von Schwarz before his other brothers.

She had her back turned to him.

If he were to act, there was no better moment than now.

Heinrich quietly followed her, preparing to use his power.

To avoid death, he would have to kill.

“…?”

But upon entering the warehouse, Heinrich couldn't help but be taken aback.

There were people inside the warehouse.

“…!”

“What… what is this…?”

Five people were bound, gagged, and kneeling.

Louise von Schwarz drew her sword.

“Alphonse. German.”

Louise stared at them.

“Do you recognize who these people are?”

“Sis… Sister.”

“Sister, why are they here…?”

Heinrich didn't know who the bound people were, but Alphonse and German clearly recognized them.

Louise pulled out her sword at her waist.

Then, she coldly looked down upon the terrified, trembling captives.

-Swish!

Her sword, imbued with blue mana, mercilessly sliced through one person's neck.

Heinrich could only watch the blood spurting from the severed neck in horror.

“Youngest one.”

Louise, after slicing one person's neck, calmly looked at Heinrich.

Heinrich, as well as Alphonse and German, had no idea what was happening.

“You are indeed a bastard.”

-Swish!

The second person's neck fell.

-Ah! Aaaaah!

Seeing two people's necks severed and blood gushing out in an instant, the others began to cry like beasts with their gags still in place.

But Louise didn't stop.

Without even looking at those who were dying, she stared at Heinrich.

He was a bastard.

He had already confirmed that. Why was she bringing it up again?

“However, do you know whose bastard you are?”

As she spoke, she struck her sword into the third person's neck.

“Sis… ter?”

“Sister…? What on earth are you talking about…?”

Not just Alphonse, but even German couldn't hide their bewilderment at her words.

It was incomprehensible, strange talk.

Strange words that didn't fit the situation.

Heinrich's face went pale.

"You are my illegitimate child."

"Wh… who…?"

Heinrich's lips were turning blue.

"Not father's, but my own illegitimate child."

Swoosh!

Louise, who had just struck the fourth and fifth necks in succession, looked at Heinrich.

"You are, my son."

Louise then turned her gaze to German and Alphonse.

"You didn't know, did you? I had to hide it from everyone, even you two. It was a promise I made to father… only by keeping it a secret would Heinrich be spared from death. I couldn't tell anyone. So, Alphonse, German, I had no choice but to follow your lead… I've been doing it until now…"

Louise looked at her brothers with sad eyes.

"But then…"

"At last…"

"In the end…"

"You two cruelly tried to kill my son."

The two had been ordering assassins to kill Heinrich in the past few days.

"I believed that you wouldn't do such a thing. No matter how much you hated or despised him, I thought you wouldn't go that far…"

Heinrich remained pale-faced, and Alphonse and German, who had learned the truth about the illegitimate child, turned white as they met their sister's cold gaze.

"If I must kill you two to save the youngest… no, Heinrich, my son… I must do it now. I can't just stand by and watch any longer."

"Sister, something is wrong. Something… something is…"

"No, it's impossible. This is madness! What are you trying to…?"

Louise von Schwarz.

"I now accept that in order to protect someone, I must kill someone else."

The swordmaster approached her brothers.

"Even if that someone is my own blood-related brothers."

With a pale face, Heinrich watched the cruel execution unfold before him.

CHAPTER 536

A few days ago.

Louise von Schwarz had sought an audience with the Emperor.

She wished to raise objections about the decisive blow that had been dealt to the already strained relationships within the Schwarz royal family.

"Your Majesty, it seems you take a great interest in the affairs of the Schwarz royal family."

"How can I not be interested in matters concerning one of the main pillars of the Allied Forces?"

Emperor Bertus de Gardias.

Some emperors excel in times of war, while others shine in times of peace.

Louise von Schwarz did not know which kind of emperor Bertus was.

However, although the empire was not thriving, it still breathed.

It had managed to unite the surviving countries and organize the Allied Forces.

"I assume, Your Majesty, that you are aware that casually speaking about such a sensitive subject within the Gardias imperial family is a great insult to the Schwarz royal family."

Though the empire was clearly superior, Kernstadt was not a nation to be trifled with.

If the Kernstadt army were to withdraw from the Allied Forces, it would be tantamount to losing about 30% of their total power. That was how significant the role of the Kernstadt army was within the Allied Forces.

Even for a superior nation, the emperor's remarks about the youngest prince of the

Schwarz royal family being an illegitimate child were a grave diplomatic faux pas and a mistake on the emperor's part. Even if the comments were made in private, not in public.

Louise von Schwarz's icy gaze was met with Bertus's constant smile, as always.

"Why do you think I am not aware that it's better to remain silent?"

The matter of the illegitimate child.

Remaining silent would benefit him.

"If I had remained silent, Heinrich would have been assassinated by his jealous and inferior brothers, and I would have had the opportunity to eradicate the ever-troublesome Schwarz royal family from the empire."

"There may be a considerable amount of turmoil, but we have a greater cause right now, don't we? We are waging a war upon which the fate of humanity depends. The Allied Forces may be shaken, but they will not collapse. We are fighting a war with a justifiable reason."

"Trading Heinrich von Schwarz's life for the complete overthrow of the Schwarz royal family, whom the empire has always wanted to eliminate, is the exchange. Everything would have fallen into place if I remained silent. Would it not be better to stay silent?"

Bertus's malicious words, contrasting with his smiling expression, only hardened Louise's expression further.

By remaining silent, Kernstadt would have fallen on its own, and Bertus could have used the chaos to eliminate the Schwarz royal family under the pretext of the greater cause, and then swallow the entire Kernstadt army.

There would have been tremendous resistance from the Kernstadt army, but this war was not about personal gain; it was for the greater cause.

Bertus knew that, despite the immense turmoil, the Allied Forces would not collapse.

Kernstadt, a potential major competitor after the war, would fall on its own. There was no reason not to watch it happen.

"What are you saying now?"

"I merely wanted to say that the reason I caused this diplomatic faux pas was not because I had some hidden agenda, but because I didn't want to see a friend die… That's all there is to it."

He could have stood idly by.

Bertus didn't have to say anything to Heinrich when he came to seek help.

Though Heinrich was an important force, if the empire could exchange his life for its future, it should have done so.

But Bertus didn't do that.

Heinrich was not given a direct answer, but was provided with some degree of truth.

Not the entire truth, but a certain extent of it.

"A terrible thing happens when you do not cherish your friends; I know this much now."

Louise could not understand Bertus's cryptic remark.

But if left unattended, Heinrich will be killed.

At that thought, Louise clenched her teeth.

"Are you so certain that something so unthinkable will happen?"

"Your two brothers are worse people than you think."

Trust in the name of siblings.

No, it is not even that.

Trust in humanity itself.

In this situation, facing such a battle, they would try to assassinate a more talented illegitimate child out of jealousy.

Louise could not understand that such a foolish and absurd thing could happen.

Those who possess more rights than anyone else should also bear more responsibility.

She had a shred of faith that they would not commit such a reckless act.

Louise von Schwarz did not believe that such an unthinkable event could occur.

She did not think her brothers could be so foolish.

She did not have high expectations, but she thought it would not be that bad.

But the deed had already been done.

The other brothers had started to argue that they must act first.

Alphonse and German seriously believed that if they did not kill Heinrich, they might die themselves.

Up until now, it had been a matter of possibility, but from now on, it would be a question of when.

And wasn't it the emperor who started it all with the word "illegitimate child"?

If Heinrich had not heard that word, this would not have happened.

But was that really the case? Louise had seen, from afar and up close, the scenes of them blatantly ignoring and despising Heinrich.

Would it have happened anyway, even without this?

In places she cannot see, in places she is unaware of, without even seeking her consent.

Would there really be no attempt to kill Heinrich through their own unilateral actions?

She did not think they would be so foolish, so naive.

Could humans really be that foolish?

Louise von Schwarz secretly wanted to grind her fist into the emperor's face, who was whining after having thrown a bomb so irresponsibly.

But had the bomb already been there?

Was it just that she did not want to acknowledge that it was a bomb?

"It's honestly a bit disappointing that you, the commander of Kernstadt, have come like this."

“…Are you saying that you're disappointed right now?"

Louise narrowed her eyes at the emperor's remark, which sounded like the pot calling the kettle black.

Did he think the emperor's prestige was as it was in the past?

All human forces have diminished, so the emperor no longer has the same prestige and authority as before.

Did he delude himself into thinking that he was standing above everyone else, like the days when the empire's power pierced the sky after the Great Demon War?

"The emperor of the empire has committed the rudeness of meddling in the domestic affairs of another country to save the life of the commander's son, and instead of being grateful, you come here to argue. Isn't that disappointing?"

"…!"

"Did you think I wouldn't know?"

Bertus de Gardias.

At the emperor's words, Louise felt chills run down her spine.

In the Schwarz royal family, only the king, the current queen, and Louise knew about it.

The emperor knew.

"The commander graduated from the Kernstadt Royal Academy at the age of eighteen."

"…"

Kernstadt Royal Academy.

She was a genius, and she even graduated from the Royal Academy early.

That's what everyone knew.

"After traveling abroad for about a year under the pretext of a graduation trip, Heinrich von Schwarz was born… I don't think it was a coincidence."

Louise stared wide-eyed at Bertus, meeting his gaze.

"Wasn't it dropping out rather than graduating early?"

Louise felt suffocated by the pressure of Bertus's gaze.

"Raphael Müller."

"…!"

"Do I need to explain more?"

The Emperor already knew the name that Louise had buried deep in her heart long ago.

That name was undoubtedly the name of the man she had loved.

He had died long ago.

"I couldn't understand why the Schwarz royal family admitted a child, who was presumed to be a bastard, into the royal family… King Constantine was so particular about these things that he wouldn't have a bastard, and if Queen Solennine knew

about the existence of a bastard, she would faint. But for some reason, Heinrich was not only not dealt with but also accepted… I don't get it. The Schwarz royal family I know is not like this."

Louise looked at Bertus with a stern expression.

These were people whose character wouldn't allow for the possibility of a bastard, and even if there was one, they wouldn't admit the child into the royal family.

But somehow, Heinrich was admitted into the royal family. Of course, this is an inference made from the outcome.

The youngest prince, who is excessively despised, seems to be a bastard, but if they hated him so much, why didn't they just kill him?

There must be a reason they couldn't help but keep him alive.

Louise von Schwarz, despite her age, has not married.

Although she has not yet ascended to the throne, the successor must have a very important heir.

Despite this, she hasn't married and seems to have no intention of doing so in the future.

And the Kernstadt Royal Academy is very similar to the Temple.

Various classes mix and receive education.

Bertus's words are both politically and personally very rude.

It could be a problem if someone were to question it.

But Louise couldn't say anything. That in itself was already a piece of evidence.

"I have several conjectures in my head, but I won't say them out loud. Any more than this would just be tormenting the commander."

"…"

"That's the point."

Bertus put down his teacup and looked at the frozen Louise von Schwarz.

"You can't protect everything."

One has to choose.

Heinrich was made aware of the fact that he was in danger, and this led to a dispute.

"You have to choose. Before you lose everything by not choosing this or that."

Bertus had accelerated the inevitable.

So, Louise von Schwarz has to choose something before everything falls apart, thinking that she'll be fine as it is.

“…Is it really just because you wanted Heinrich to live?"

At Louise's soft question, Bertus chuckled.

"What else could be the reason for enduring such an uncomfortable meeting when I could've avoided it by staying still?"

He wanted his friend to live.

Even though staying still would have cost him some power, he would have gained a significant political advantage. Still, Bertus didn't do that.

Louise von Schwarz risked triggering her own backlash, and Bertus gave Heinrich a hint.

So what was that all for?

At Bertus's words, Louise could no longer think that the Emperor had any sinister intentions.

"If you wish to protect your son, you must shed blood."

It seemed as if Bertus would no longer interfere in the affairs of other countries'

households.

"Why…"

"Why did you kill Raphael?"

"Why, of all things…"

"Why did you have to go to such lengths?"

It was a long time ago.

"You must be out of your mind."

"We cannot allow the dirty seed of commoners in the royal family."

"We told you to understand their physiology by mingling and studying with commoners, not to give your heart to them."

"Despite your wisdom and talent, you couldn't even make that simple distinction?"

"He dared to covet what a lowly commoner like him should not possess, so we gave him a fitting punishment."

"Do you think there is room for petty emotions like love in the path to becoming the queen of Kernstadt, surpassing the Gardias royal family and laying the foundation for the empire?"

"You were foolish, daughter."

"Yes, humans make mistakes. No one is perfect, so you made a mistake too."

"Let's move past this mistake."

"Forget everything and start anew."

Upon hearing her father, Constantine von Schwarz's cruel words, Louise's soul left her body.

It was a premature love.

It could be called naive, but it was love nonetheless.

Their awkward love bore an awkward fruit, and they had to pay a cruel price.

For the first time, Louise experienced true emotions, free from the suffocating world where everything was forced upon her.

In the real world where she only encountered dignity, hypocrisy, honor, and pretense, it was the first thing she had ever wanted for herself.

That was taken away from her.

It was brutally trampled upon.

"I hate it."

It was a trade.

"Please, don't take anything more from me."

"What did you say?"

"If you try to take more, you'll lose me."

It was a trade for her life.

She couldn't get back what had been taken away, but she didn't want to lose anything more.

That's why she threatened her parents with her life.

"Don't try to take my child."

The king and queen could not give up the greatest treasure of the Schwarz royal family, a treasure that only appears once in history.

The child born to their daughter was disguised as the father's illegitimate child and integrated into the royal family.

Very few people knew the truth, including other royals and even the child himself.

At the end of numerous lies, deceptions, and half-truths, events unfolded.

"…"

"Brothers… sister…"

Louise von Schwarz, who killed her last two siblings with her own hands, stared at the frightened eyes of her son looking at her.

Swoosh

She sheathed her sword.

"Let's go back."

"Sister, what do you mean… What are you talking about? I just… my brothers…"

"I said, let's go back."

Her two brothers had tried to kill Heinrich several times without consulting her.

Had Louise not been vigilant, she would have lost her son while wide awake.

If the emperor had had a different intention, he could have used this incident to not only implicate her two brothers but also herself, destroying the Schwarz royal family.

It was unclear what had caused the change in his feelings, but the emperor had changed his mind.

Instead of punishing the Schwarz royal family, he warned Louise to act quickly, or it might be too late.

The emperor told her that she must shed blood if she wanted to protect something.

Louise shed blood.

By killing her own blood, she was able to protect her bloodline.

Louise staggered as she walked towards the horse.

Her blood-soaked fingertips trembled violently, as if seized by convulsions.

Leaving behind the horses that Alphonse and German had ridden, Louise mounted her horse, and Heinrich, his face pale, followed her command and climbed onto his horse as well.

She had killed her siblings.

How could she reveal this?

Louise had no plan.

She didn't even know what to say to her youngest brother, who had just discovered that his older sister was actually his mother, with his face drained of color.

She had to make a choice, and she did.

That was all there was to it.

Hee-hee-hee!

Rushing on their horses, they left the abandoned warehouse, their figures disappearing.

Confusion and uncertainty.

As the two figures, laden with those emotions, vanished from the warehouse, two more appeared from thin air.

"…"

"…"

Reinhardt and Harriet were there, having heard the unbelievable story.

"What is… what's going on?"

"I… I don't know."

Harriet lowered her head in response to Reinhardt's pale words.

CHAPTER 537

Heinrich refused to join them, but that didn't mean he would be left to die.

Therefore, Sarkegaar continued to report on the situation at the Kernstadt garrison, and I was also keeping an eye on things.

Believing that an assassination was likely, I followed them with Harriet.

It seemed that Louise von Schwarz would lay a hand on Heinrich, but quite unexpectedly, she ended up killing her own siblings.

Moreover, I could hear the shocking truth that the illegitimate child was indeed Louise's, not the king's.

Charlotte had said this when she heard about the assassination attempt on Heinrich.

‘Louise von Schwarz couldn't possibly be involved in such foolishness.’

The siblings conspired to assassinate Heinrich.

It wasn't a conspiracy of all the siblings, but rather the second and third siblings, or perhaps the independent actions of either one.

Louise von Schwarz was a person entirely unrelated to the original incident.

She lost her son due to her siblings' foolishness.

And whether she knew the truth or not, she was executed alongside her siblings under the emperor's wrath.

In the original work, there were moments that passed too quickly, with reasons and hidden stories that I didn't know.

It was the same this time as well.

Charlotte's suspicion that Heinrich might be an illegitimate child.

And the truth that the child was indeed illegitimate but belonged to the princess, not the king and queen.

While there were events that hadn't happened in the original work, Louise von Schwarz did not stand idly by but killed her siblings with her own hands.

I don't know what triggered this: which event, emotion, or circumstance.

However, Heinrich survived.

Louise von Schwarz, who was thought to be one of the main culprits, was actually the person who had to protect Heinrich.

Seeing her devastated after killing her siblings, it seemed she was shocked by her own actions.

In the original work, Louise couldn't choose between her siblings and Heinrich.

As a result of her indecision, Heinrich died, and she too perished.

But now, Louise had made a choice.

I don't know what excuse she, as the commander of the Kernstadt forces, will make for her siblings' deaths.

Although the deceased had their roles and problems would arise, it was a better situation than Louise or Heinrich dying.

Staying put would be enough.

It truly was enough just to stay put.

The changed world showed a different development, but I couldn't know specifically how and what had changed to lead to this outcome.

Harriet and I left the abandoned warehouse area and hid in a nearby forest.

"I don't know what happened, but… it's alright, isn't it?"

"Yes, it seems we don't need to worry any further."

Harriet nodded at my words.

We knew who really intended to kill Heinrich, and Louise intervened.

There would be issues and complications, but Heinrich's life was no longer in danger.

If Louise von Schwarz had been the actual monster, things would have become more complicated. Fortunately, that wasn't the case.

However, we learned of a more complex family situation.

The definite advice of the oracle was that the changed world would show a changed ending, so we should just watch.

I couldn't help but understand the ambiguous advice of the oracle as well.

"That's right… The fact that Heinrich has been alive until now… It actually doesn't make sense…"

"What do you mean?"

"If Heinrich really were the king's illegitimate child, there would be no need to accept him into the royal family."

The queen was not a person of high enough standing to acknowledge a bastard child.

Charlotte suspected that it might have been the stubbornness of the King of Kernstadt that had forced the situation.

Even some members of the royal family went so far as to try to kill Heinrich.

But in the end, all they did was banish him to the temple.

It was strange that Heinrich was alive in the first place.

"Louise von Schwarz must have tried her best to save Heinrich… that's what happened."

"…I guess so."

How Louise von Schwarz gave birth to Heinrich and how that secret has been kept until now is unknown.

But even the other royals had no idea that Louise had a bastard child.

Only the king, queen, and Louise herself would have known for sure.

During past incidents, Louise would have pleaded.

Please, do not kill him.

Just let him live outside of our sight.

Perhaps such a deal had taken place.

The only reason a bastard who would be better off dead survived this long was because he was the son of Louise von Schwarz, who had the most outstanding qualities in the history of the Schwarz royal family.

Just as Louise had tried her best to use her status and position to save Heinrich.

Heinrich's very existence might have been a gag for Louise in some way.

They might have held Heinrich's life hostage to control Louise's actions.

Heinrich would have been used by the current King of Kernstadt to manipulate the first princess.

That's why he survived.

If Heinrich died, they couldn't predict the actions of the kingdom's heirs.

Why did Heinrich survive?

If he was just a king's bastard, he would have died long ago. It's an obvious situation, so how could he have survived this long?

It's because there was a use and need for Heinrich.

Heinrich was precious to Louise.

Heinrich was useful to the royal family.

If I had realized the truth, I would have known that Louise von Schwarz could not be the culprit, and I could have resolved this matter more easily or just stood by.

The oracle's guidance was of that nature.

And the oracle's guidance had the potential to bring about both good and bad outcomes.

The good outcome would be that Heinrich's assassination had been averted without major bloodshed.

The bad outcome would, of course, be the other issues that might arise from this situation.

Those issues could potentially lead to more bad outcomes.

"What will… happen?"

"Indeed."

Bad things can happen at any time on a battlefield.

Therefore, predicting them was meaningless.

Heinrich had always thought that his siblings twisted his words, no matter what he said.

But, the same applied to himself.

‘Ah, you're here, youngest. Take a seat.’

‘There must be a reason for the siblings to gather. Your affiliation is not with our army, so it's hard to see your face. I called you to have a meal together.’

‘Will you return to Kernstadt when this situation is resolved?’

‘That's a shame, really.’

‘You must be tired. Go ahead and rest first.’

In hindsight, she was just a woman of few words.

There was no difference between the other siblings and himself when it came to attributing too much meaning to her words and feeling upset on their own.

He just didn't know.

He couldn't help but face her, carrying complex emotions after such a long time apart.

He didn't know how to deal with someone he had no choice but to face with such mixed feelings.

All he could think of were those words, and nothing else came to mind.

Naturally a taciturn person, he could only say so much when his heart was weighed down by even more complicated emotions.

It was merely a misunderstanding of those few words he could muster from his tangled heart.

He was no different from his other siblings.

And in the end, unable to bear watching her other two brothers make extreme choices, Louise made another extreme choice of her own – to kill her brothers with her own hands.

"…”

"…”

On their way back to the garrison.

The horses walked slowly, and no conversation passed between Heinrich and Louise.

Because she had killed her brothers with her own hands, Louise's complexion had

turned deathly pale, and Heinrich, who had witnessed the scene and heard the shocking truth, was in no better state.

No conversation passed between them.

It was not a situation for conversation, and nothing had been settled yet.

A person who had much to say.

A person who had many questions.

None could speak a word.

"I'm sorry. For everything. All of it."

The two horses walked quietly.

"It's all… my fault."

In the end, that was the only apology Louise could barely manage.

The two princes of Kernstadt had died. Not executed publicly, but assassinated by Louise von Schwarz's arbitrary decision.

It was illegal and procedurally unjust.

The information Louise von Schwarz shared with the army was simple.

Missing.

The two princes had their own forces as well.

However, they were no match for Louise von Schwarz.

It could be a desertion disguised as a disappearance for the honor of the Schwarz royal family, and most of the high-ranking officers knew there were undisclosed details.

But Louise offered no explanation.

As Emperor Bertus had said, it was a war for a greater cause.

The disappearance or desertion of the two princes.

Or their death.

It was a significant problem, but Commander Louise von Schwarz was alive and well.

The void left by the two princes could somehow be filled by reorganizing the command structure.

Ultimately, the two irreplaceable beings had survived, and the two replaceable beings had tried to kill the youngest, fearing their own positions would become unstable.

Therefore, the void left by the relatively weaker two princes could be filled easily.

Emperor Bertus knew what had happened but made no mention of it.

Since the Emperor remained silent, the high command, who were aware of the suspicious circumstances, also kept silent.

Though the Kernstadt army was in disarray due to the sudden disappearance of the two princes, it wasn't enough to cause a rift.

Even with two legs lost, the head was still alive, so there was no fighting over who would be the next head.

The allied forces left Senkelien and began to march towards the next operation site.

Although the situation had settled for the time being, the relationship that had changed could not be turned back.

Once a secret is revealed, it cannot be undone.

The assassination threat had disappeared, and Heinrich learned that he was the child of his elder sister.

"…"

"…"

The relationship between the two hadn't worsened.

She had to kill her brothers with her own hands to protect her child and even lie about it.

Louise von Schwarz killed her brothers to protect her child.

They just didn't know what to say to each other.

Not knowing how to rebuild their relationship from the beginning or what bricks of words to stack.

A person who had given birth but never lived as a parent.

A person who had been born but never experienced having parents.

Neither knew how to rebuild this misaligned relationship from the beginning.

Louise and Heinrich had not exchanged any conversation since then.

Beyond work-related discussions, there was no personal interaction.

Until recently, they at least exchanged customary greetings, but now even that had ceased.

Despite knowing that they could never be strangers to one another, for some reason, Heinrich felt as if they had become even less than that.

Beside Louise, who led the army and drove the horses without conversation, was Heinrich.

Suddenly, Louise tensed her whole body as a voice invaded her mind.

'I have something to report to the commander.'

“…What is it?"

Telepathy.

Just as Heinrich received messages from the general command via Evia's telepathy, commanders of each unit also received the general command's intentions through telepathy.

It wasn't that messengers or communication magic were not used, but telepathy was immediate and fast since it didn't require magical tools.

Of course, many officers found the sensation of this unannounced telepathy quite unpleasant. As a result, a considerable number of people had their adjutants receive the telepathy instead.

Louise von Schwarz found the telepathy quite uncomfortable.

It felt like an invasion of her personal space.

She experienced a strange sensation, as if someone were witnessing something no one else should be able to see.

However, Louise was not one to pass this on to someone else.

'The small warp gate in Lagirian, which was the next target, has already been destroyed, so the alliance will continue to advance to the Seta location instead of the next planned garrison.'

"Hmm… Understood. Carry on."

'Yes, Commander.'

Heinrich realized that Louise had received telepathy when he heard her murmuring.

Louise looked at Heinrich.

"The next operation area has already been cleared. That's why we continue to advance."

"I see…"

Though they didn't engage in personal conversation, they had to have these dry

exchanges due to their positions.

Heinrich quietly watched as Louise informed her adjutants of the army-wide broadcast. He observed the messengers riding between the marching armies to relay the new operation changes to each unit commander.

Louise gazed at the endless procession of marching troops.

Not having to face death in battle at the next operation area would be a good thing.

But the extended march was just another hardship for the soldiers who had to walk the distance.

Louise pondered what would be better and couldn't help but feel a sense of absurdity.

The Emperor, Bertus.

It was Bertus who had personally told her that if she didn't kill her brothers, Heinrich would be murdered.

What would have happened if the two had known that their youngest brother Heinrich was actually their illegitimate nephew?

'Perhaps they would have wanted to kill him even more.'

Louise had never married.

If Louise von Schwarz died in this war, the eldest son, German von Schwarz, would become the next heir to the throne since Louise had no official children.

Deep down, he might have hoped for her own death.

Now that she had realized how foolish and short-sighted her brothers were, that suspicion had turned into certainty.

If Louise von Schwarz died during the war, German would become the next heir to the Schwarz royal family.

If that happened, perhaps Alphonse, who could never have dreamt of becoming the

heir, would have been jealous of his brother and tried to kill him to inherit the throne.

Without Heinrich, could German have tried to kill her instead? Then, would Alphonse have killed German, and the Schwarz royal throne would have gone to Alphonse?

"…"

Louise found it amusing that she would even entertain such thoughts.

Attempting to weigh the foolishness of her brothers after killing them with her own hands was nothing more than self-justification for their deserving deaths.

There were choices and consequences.

She killed her brothers because they had tried to kill her child.

In exchange, the child survived.

All other judgments were meaningless.

She never managed to have any real conversation with the child.

It couldn't be right to leave things like this.

How she had resisted the urge to abandon everything, knowing what had happened, why it had happened, and what words had been exchanged. How many times her life had been weighed on the scales.

How many days she had swallowed her tears, thinking only of how well the child would fare at the temple, while living a life forced upon her.

Louise wanted to tell him everything, but she couldn't bring herself to speak, fearing that it would only come off as an excuse for not fulfilling her parental duties.

When the war ends…

Will they be able to talk once everything is settled?

After the veil of darkness shrouding humanity's fate has been lifted, will they be able to share all their stories?

The battlefield was too heavy a place for sharing stories of sorrow and pain.

And so, the only story they could share now was that of the war.

"Youngest one…"

Louise opened her mouth to speak but found herself tongue-tied.

Was it appropriate to call him the youngest?

But she couldn't call him her son. In this situation, with watchful eyes and attentive ears, wasn't it impossible to raise the subject of her illegitimate child, just as it was for the eldest sister to call the youngest her son?

However, it seemed as if Heinrich understood her, looking at Louise.

"Yes, Sister."

"…"

Things they knew but couldn't say.

His expression showed that he understood well enough. Louise felt miserable and bit her lip slightly.

But it was a conversation about the war, their current situation.

They couldn't avoid discussing it just because of petty matters.

"Do you think you're close to Emperor Bertus?"

At the mention of the Emperor's name, Heinrich fell silent for a moment.

"To be honest… I don't think I am close to him. However, we did spend time together in the same class at the temple…"

"I see."

Had it not been for Emperor Bertus' words, Louise might have failed to weigh her brothers' foolishness and lost Heinrich.

The Emperor knew that Heinrich was her illegitimate child and even knew the name of the man she had once loved.

But that wasn't the issue Louise was currently pondering.

"The Supreme Command is hiding something."

The excessively rapid advance, the abnormal weather on the level of natural disasters, and the preemption of operational zones.

Only good things were happening to the Allied Forces.

Ellen Artorius, Saviolin Turner, Shanafel, and the royal mages.

They might have achieved this speed by pooling all their resources, but Louise couldn't shake off the feeling that something was off about the whole process.

"What are they hiding? Do you know?"

Heinrich stared at the marching route in response to Louise's question.

“…I don't know."

Just as Heinrich didn't know his mother well.

Louise didn't know her son well either.

However, she had now learned one thing.

"I see…”

Louise discovered that her son was not skilled at lying.

CHAPTER 538

12th month.

Winter had arrived.

Starting from Senkelien, the Allied Forces went on to destroy the warp gates of the small cities surrounding Riselen one by one, as if going around its periphery.

The small warp gates in the minor cities were already devastated by the vanguard of the Demon King's forces, and the Imperial High Command had disguised it as the work of the Empire's vanguard.

Only a handful of people knew that the Allied Forces were receiving help from the Demon King.

The moment that information became public, the confusion felt by the Allied Forces could have led to enormous divisions, so it had to be kept top secret.

It was a given that a massive army would have to go through winter. This war would continue beyond the year.

Seven small cities and three medium-sized cities.

So far, these were the achievements of the Allied Forces.

In the Allied Forces' headquarters, Bertus stood before a map, his face stern as he watched the situation unfold before the many military commanders gathered.

It wasn't as if all the battles they had experienced so far were minor.

But now, the Allied Forces were faced with the largest battle they had ever encountered.

Three large warp gates.

One super-large warp gate.

Seven small warp gates.

The largest city in the southern part of Riselen.

Serandia.

It would be their first time destroying a super-large warp gate.

That was the crux of the matter.

The chief of operations began the report.

"Your Majesty, we anticipate that successfully attacking Serandia will significantly reduce the monster hordes in the southern region of Riselen."

"By using the Razi River flowing near Serandia as a water source, we believe we can secure water supplies locally. If we can replace the transportation needed for water supplies with other resources, the Allied Forces will have an easier time enduring the winter."

"However, due to the nature of winter operations, a significant loss of combat power is expected while the main force moves to Serandia. Also, once the operation begins, a retreat will be nearly impossible. If we fail, we expect irreversible and severe losses."

"We could focus on defending our garrison and spend the winter before starting the campaign to conquer Serandia. However, in this case, it remains unclear whether the army can receive necessary supplies smoothly until spring. The monsters gathered in Serandia will likely launch periodic raids on the Allied Forces' garrison during the winter, and since they will continue to be replenished, there will be no loss of their combat power."

Bertus narrowed his brow as he listened to the chief of staff's report.

Winter was a season when everything froze, and soldiers were no exception.

A winter march was even more hellish than a regular one.

There would be soldiers who would lose their frozen toes, not just from exhaustion.

While the priests of the Holy Order could heal with their divine magic, not everyone could receive such benefits.

Since the area around a large city was teeming with waves of monsters, the Allied Forces' garrison was set up far away from Serandia.

Just reaching Serandia, the battlefield, would require a forced march.

In the midst of a harsh winter, the monsters would become increasingly more numerous.

It was by no means an environment where they could rest for a day and fight.

At their most exhausted, the troops would have to face the largest number of enemies.

And that would be during winter.

'If only there were a change in the weather that would improve conditions on our way… But we can't necessarily count on that… '

By marching through the harsh winter, they would proceed with the campaign to conquer Serandia.

In the end, immense casualties were expected in the campaign.

And capturing Serandia wouldn't mean the end of the Gate crisis.

There were still cities to be destroyed.

If they suffered irreversible losses here, the next battle would be even harder.

As it becomes more difficult and burdensome, if the loss of irreplaceable personnel continues.

In the end, they would fail to destroy the last Gate, and humanity would lose all hope.

But what if they held out here through the winter and attacked Serandia in the spring?

Armies consume enormous resources.

People need to eat, and something must be done to withstand the cold.

And while they're stationed here, there's Serandia, where monsters pour out of the giant warp gates, albeit far away.

They would have to continue their defensive battles throughout the winter, resulting in not only resource but also personnel losses.

However, if they managed to successfully conquer Serandia, they could at least secure resources to endure the winter. They would also be able to log the nearby forested area to survive the cold.

Would they endure the winter there after risking heavy casualties in a large-scale assault to bring down Serandia?

They would lie low here until the weather warmed, engaging in continuous attrition warfare and entering battle in a relatively better condition.

"We can't hold out here through the winter. We're heading to Serandia."

Help cannot always be expected.

But there had always been help.

That's why Bertus had no choice but to rely on the Demon King's forces this time as well.

The frozen land where the allied forces were heading would thaw, and an anomalous climate named warm sunlight would appear.

The ruler of humanity depends on the Demon King.

'If I can't get help anymore… '

He couldn't be confident that he wouldn't panic.

Bertus chuckled to himself.

-Meow

-Meow

-Meow

-Meow

"…”

-Meow!

Ellen regained consciousness at the sound of what seemed like a call for her.

A black cat, who knows since when, had been pressing its front paws on her thigh.

Somehow, the cat looked up with a pitiful gaze, as if worried.

Why was it doing this?

Ellen was inside a tent, sitting in a chair. Only then did she realize that she had lost consciousness for a moment.

She had heard there was a meeting about the Serandia attack.

But Ellen didn't necessarily attend the meeting. Though she did have a say, and it wasn't taken lightly. However, Ellen never felt comfortable discussing life-and-death issues in such a setting.

So, she was contemplating whether to go or not.

But when she came to her senses, the cat that had been absent for a few days was crying in front of her.

Ellen didn't bother to lock her quarters in the garrison these days.

Royal-class garrison security was strict, and no one in the garrison would rudely enter Ellen's quarters uninvited.

So she left her quarters unlocked so the cat could come in whenever it wanted.

Thus, it wandered in freely.

-Meow

With her left hand, Ellen held the necklace, and with her right hand, she stroked the head of the pitifully crying cat.

"I'm fine…"

Ellen now knew that pouring her heart into something could help.

She felt as if this little being was watching over her.

However, even so, the moments of losing consciousness increased.

"It'll be okay…"

The cat just looked up at Ellen quietly.

Losing consciousness, her existence disappearing.

It was a terrifying thing, but Ellen had something more important ahead.

The Serandia attack.

The Colossal Warp Gate

The battle would only grow more arduous and challenging.

"Reinhardt…"

Ellen knew what the high command knew.

Reinhardt would, in some way, support the conquest of Serandia.

He had always been helping, and now, he would once again support this battle in his own way.

From somewhere.

-Meow

Undoubtedly, he was watching over her.

Ellen's condition was steadily worsening.

He had been aware of her occasional losses of consciousness, and though he appeared as a cat, he had witnessed it before.

But losing consciousness was not the right term.

It was closer to someone else taking control of her consciousness.

Her dark eyes, like an abyss, stared at him quietly. With eyes that he couldn't tell whether they were looking at him or not.

They stared at him only with blurry, unfocused pupils.

Nothing could be read from those eyes other than emptiness.

It was an eerie feeling that went beyond being unsettling.

Not only Ellen but also the Royal Class people had felt a strong sense of unease when Ellen occasionally fell into such a state.

Though they did not know how a cat could be of any help, it seemed apparent that Ellen was affected by it.

The necklace that Ellen wore was unclear as well, but by now, they had somewhat sensed that it was playing a similar role.

If her condition went past the point of no return…

Would he only see Ellen with those empty eyes?

Although he occasionally visited the Royal Class garrison to check on Ellen's

condition and the situation of the Royal Class people, he could not always stay there.

He had to not only break through the march route but also receive sleep training from Airi, and while Charlotte took care of Edina's work, he still received reports on crucial matters.

He is a pet-type demon king.

And just like Ellen was steeling herself for a great battle, so was he.

For now, the imminent issue was the conquest of the huge city, Serandia.

"I assume we'll advance. They'll be expecting our help."

A council meeting with all of Edina's core members.

"Since enduring the winter would inevitably become a war of attrition, they would have no choice but to make such a decision."

I nodded at Eleris's response.

A full-scale battle after a march through the harsh cold.

A defensive battle in the bitter cold, followed by a full-scale battle after welcoming spring.

Both would entail immense burdens.

In the original story, this time was not winter. They faced winter in another metropolis conquest.

In that situation, the allied forces chose to endure.

But now, we were assisting them, and Liana had awakened her ability to manipulate the weather, which she couldn't use in the original story.

Thus, they would expect our help and choose to advance.

We would protect the path of the allied forces not from monsters, but from the weather.

We would be able to shield them from the bitter cold on their journey.

However, the next problem.

"We need to decide what to do when the attack on Serandia begins."

It was Luvien's words.

Yes, we had to decide that.

In previous gate conquests, we destroyed the warp gates within our capabilities before the allied forces could strike.

But for the medium-sized warp gates, we swept away the monsters with a preemptive strike and handed them over to the allied forces afterward.

Though we took on the role of a vanguard unit unknown to the allied forces, we had no intention of drawing their attention when the primary operation began.

But the scale of this operation was different.

At one massive warp gate, there were three large warp gates.

Even with the weather changes caused by Liana, there were limits to the monsters that could be dealt with, and even if the monsters were annihilated, they would be replenished at an incredibly fast rate.

A preemptive strike could yield significant results.

However, if the operation were left solely to the allied forces, we could succeed in the invasion of Serandia, but casualties would inevitably occur as we didn't fight directly.

If we were to join the battle, the number of those sacrificed would decrease, and the allied forces would be able to conserve their strength.

From a practical standpoint, it is right for us to participate in the battle as well.

"However, our participation may help the invasion of Serandia in the short term, but in the long term, it may be a significant mistake."

“…That's true."

I had no choice but to agree with Gallarush's words.

Antirianus spoke up.

"Our army may be small, but it is impossible not to be noticed on the battlefield. Just look at the large-scale magic that the Lords and Heavenly Kings here can use. The lightning used by the Thunder King, the divine power and artifact used by the Demon Lord and by the Holy Order's leader, Tiamata, and the Alsbringer used by the Great Being are no exception."

Our power was too strong and would inevitably attract attention.

Sarkegaar, who had returned to Lazak for the meeting, spoke up.

"The current coalition command is aware of our assistance. A small number of people in charge of frontline reconnaissance are keeping quiet. And the personnel of each military command believe that the events at the front are due to the Empire's power. Of course, many are suspicious, but neither the Empire nor the allied forces seem to be mentioning it."

"But if we reveal ourselves in this battle, most of the allied forces, especially the ordinary soldiers, will learn of our involvement, which could lead to unforeseen problems."

"Your Majesty, I believe it is a wise decision not to reveal ourselves in the invasion of Serandia."

Large-scale magic, Meteor Summoning.

There is no such destructive magic among humans. The moment it is used, they will sense the appearance of the Demon Lord's forces.

The moment when meteors rained down from the sky that had turned into a broken mirror and hit the temple is remembered as an unforgettable nightmare for those who saw it in the Imperial Capital. Moreover, there would be no one who had not heard rumors about that magic.

Since the meteor shower began simultaneously with the gate incident, the meteor

shower crossing the sky became a symbol of the Demon King's return.

If Olivia summons the Death Knights and sweeps the battlefield, the allied forces might panic and try to attack them.

Alsbringer goes without saying.

If we participate in the battle, we will undoubtedly help the allied forces.

There is no reason to help if it is not with power but only with minor assistance.

If we want to help properly, numerous allied forces will realize that the Demon Lord's forces have appeared. Our help may lead to the failure of the operation.

To be blunt, if someone were to discover me killing monsters on the battlefield and shout, "The Demon Lord has appeared!" the entire alliance would accept it as "the Demon Lord attacked the alliance during a large-scale battle."

Bertus faced a dilemma: whether to march after enduring a war of attrition in the winter, or to march immediately at the risk of significant damage.

The same is true for me.

If we help in the attack on Serandia, the allied forces' casualties might be reduced, but our presence might create additional problems.

If we don't help and merely stand by, we'll be witnessing the deaths of countless people who might have lived had we been there.

Among them are the lives of many people I know.

They'll probably find a way to survive on their own.

Is that a petty thought I should hold onto while I stand aside and watch the assault on Serandia?

There is no such thing as an absolutely right choice.

Every choice requires gaining something while accepting something else in return.

Throughout my time in this world, every choice I've made has been like that.

Choices where I gain something and lose something else.

I must make that choice again now.

I have not exchanged words with Bertus, but our relationship is practically that of allies.

However, only a small number of people accept that fact.

To the majority, I am still a name synonymous with terror, and no one believes that the Demon King would fight alongside them.

If anything, it would only be more confusing.

The Demon King, who caused the gate crisis to exterminate humanity, is helping humanity?

Only those who have lost their sanity in despair would believe such a thing.

What if the other commanders of the allied forces or everyone in the alliance found out that the empire had been receiving the Demon King's assistance until now?

The alliance might collapse after the battle for Serandia.

"Someday, we too must fight alongside the allied forces. It's bound to happen."

Everyone in the meeting remains silent, looking at me.

The moment when we must join the battle will come. That won't change.

And, the gate crisis is becoming increasingly dangerous.

During the early stages of the gate crisis, a guerilla force led by Saviolin Turner could easily destroy cities with such gigantic warp gates. Now that the situation has grown more dangerous, it has become impossible, forcing us to travel with this large army.

Serandia is dangerous, but the cities we will face later will be even more so.

"We will only carry out a preemptive strike on Serandia, without joining the battle and watching from afar."

Whether someone dies or not, now is the time to watch those deaths.

Is turning away from those dying right now in order to prevent more deaths in the future the right choice?

I don't know.

All I can do, like Louise von Schwarz, is make a choice.

"Also, if possible, it would be nice to destroy at least a few warp gates, even if not the gigantic ones."

A preemptive strike.

If that's all we can do, then we must do everything we can within that scope.

CHAPTER 539

In the southern region of Riselen, the largest metropolis, Serandia.

Up until now, we had divided our forces into five units to secure the path of our advance.

However, now we are initiating a preemptive strike to eliminate the monsters at what can only be called the eye of the storm.

Five Vampire Lords.

Alongside them, the Holy Knights of the Holy Order, the mages of the Vampire Council, and powerful demons.

Olivia, Harriet, Liana, Airi, and myself.

Our corresponding armies, hidden within the cloaking barrier created by Harriet, looked down upon Serandia from the high ground.

The city resembled a belt, with a massive river called Razi flowing through its center, dividing the metropolis into northern and southern sections.

But the city itself was merely a shell, with monsters already swarming nearby.

Harriet muttered, her energy drained, "The monsters…"

Growl!

Screech!

Roar!

Monsters the size of skyscrapers from my past life roamed, while countless smaller monsters swarmed around their feet like ants.

There were also flying monsters that filled the sky in blackness, and among them,

monsters boasting overwhelming power.

Although we didn't have to face the dragons from another dimension just yet, a massive monster resembling a dragon had already appeared.

The number of monsters was increasing, as was their strength, making them incomparable to what we'd encountered so far.

As the Gate Incident intensified, the monsters began acting as if they were guarding the Warp Gates.

It was fortunate that the so-called boss monsters were not being produced in substantial numbers.

From the high ground, we could see that the number of monsters spewing from the Warp Gates wasn't particularly high, perhaps due to saturation.

However, if the nearby monsters were pushed away, the Warp Gates would start pouring out monsters again at an incredible speed.

No matter how elite our forces were, it was impossible to annihilate this colossal swarm of monsters numbering in the hundreds of thousands.

A hell of boiling monsters unfolded in the present world.

It was a sight that made me think the world had gone pitch black.

We had to face this.

And it would only become more numerous and dangerous.

Everyone gathered here, the non-humans and those accustomed to slaughter, couldn't help but feel tense as they beheld this hellish sight, myself included.

"They've detected us."

Even though we were on the outskirts, we were in a location with a clear view of Serandia.

It was only natural that there were monster hordes nearby, and naturally, there were

monsters that could sense our cloaking barrier and detect us.

"Let's begin."

At my command, the Vampire Lords and the clan's wizards began chanting spells.

Liana, who had already completed her preparations, began to focus her power as well.

Her abilities couldn't be used offensively when a large-scale army was engaged in a frontal battle; everyone would be swept away if she did.

Once again.

Whirrrrr!

A massive tornado erupted in the distance, near the horizon, sweeping away the monsters.

A wave of monsters poured toward us.

"All units! Battle formation!"

Olivia shouted, brandishing her demon sword, Tiamata.

Whirrr

Although we were outnumbered, Olivia could summon an army.

An army made of the dead.

Hahaha!

Over a hundred Death Knights began to crawl out of the ground in response to the demon power of Kier, wielded by Olivia, and the demon sword Tiamata.

A single Death Knight had been powerful enough to easily subdue me when I was only proficient in Magic Body Strengthening.

"Death, lead us."

Not only Olivia but also the holy knights of the Holy Order strengthen their own bodies and the bodies of the Death Knights summoned by Olivia.

Monsters have no strategy or tactics.

However, the best strategy and tactics have always been having more soldiers and a stronger army than the enemy.

Strength in numbers is both strategy and tactics.

Overwhelming numbers of monsters begin to charge at us.

While mages cast large-scale spells together and Liana creates a weather anomaly, the priests of the Holy Order, including Olivia Lanze, and the Death Knights protect them.

But that's not all.

"I'm counting on you today, Uggren."

"Grrr… Human, lend me your strength."

A priest standing on the shoulder of an ogre over five meters tall starts chanting a sacred spell, and the ogre's body becomes radiant.

The ogre's tendons, thicker than a human finger, begin to bulge and twitch in its arms.

Humans, vampires, and demons.

"Krrrrr."

Lycansloth joins the formation as well.

"For the great ancestors and the Demon King!"

"Gwoooarrr!"

The orcs, too, are covered in a blue aura.

They follow Gallarush after me and Charlotte. They must be orcs as well.

Gallarush himself seemed to dislike it, but he had lived too long to have a racial identity.

Undead, demons, and humans.

A small army of only about a hundred.

"Gwoooarrr!"

The horde of monsters clashes with the strangest army in the world.

A massive iron club swung by the ogre is imbued with divine light.

"Jjeong!"

The head of a giant monster that charges at the ogre explodes, and the ogre roars.

"Gwoooarrrrk!"

"Ahh! My ears are ringing!"

The wave of monsters crashes down, and Death Knights, Olivia, and demons stand their ground to protect the mages and Liana.

"Kwaaang! Kwaaang!"

Even while causing weather anomalies, Liana summons a lightning storm from the sky, causing the pouring monsters to explode.

They're holding them off.

They're definitely holding on.

But as monsters that can detect magic and intercept spells attack us first, those that can't also start to recognize us and push in soon after.

It was a nauseating sight, like waves undulating to engulf us.

"Krrrrrrrr!"

Flames of Tuesday.

I project magical power towards the incoming monsters, the ground erupts in flames and a vast area is swallowed in fire.

"Gwoooarrr!"

Medium and small-sized monsters that cannot withstand the flames or have no innate resistance begin to die as they try to break through the inferno.

Even so, the surviving monsters swarm in, and are crushed by Olivia and the Death Knights.

The howls of monsters, the roars of ogres, and the growls of Lycansloths shake the earth.

Flying monsters in the sky also recognize us and dive in like arrows.

"Ugh!"

Blue magical lines boil over Harriet's body, and space begins to warp around a single point in the sky.

"Jjiiiing."

Dozens of strange light refractions, as if the world itself is warping, appear.

Then.

"Kwaaarrrrrrr!"

A massive shockwave is generated, shaking not only the air but also the earth from the sky.

Shockwave.

The wings of the flying monsters diving towards us are torn apart, and their bodies explode.

A shockwave originating from the sky tore apart or hurled down the thousand or so monsters that were flying towards us.

Our individual strength could hardly be described as a hundred-to-one ratio.

But even if we were a thousand-to-one, it would still be insufficient.

The numbers were terrifyingly high.

Liana's third tornado began to tear apart the ground.

Even though the tornado appeared far away, we could feel the violent wind that tore the earth apart.

Even at this great distance, we could feel the pressure from the wind; at the site where the tornado appeared, trees were being uprooted and monsters screamed in agony.

Aside from facing fire and lightning, enemies that are too close are crushed by the Death Knight and demons.

Is this even possible?

The appearance of so many monsters and their constant resurgence as long as the warp gate was not destroyed – is this even plausible?

I feel a vague sense of despair at the unfairness I've created.

Even if they're killed, they reappear.

The warp gate that once benefited humanity has now become the greatest catastrophe to humans.

The tragic, no, unjust situation I created with shallow and half-baked thoughts makes me realize how superficial I was.

-Growl!

In the midst of the overwhelming sight of the creatures' onslaught.

I am here seeking salvation.

I know that someday this tragedy will end.

But how many must die? How many will be sacrificed?

Who will die?

Who will survive?

-Kwarrururung!

A lightning-spewing monster reduced a Death Knight to ashes, and Olivia stepped on the monster's foot and climbed up its leg, driving her Demonic Sword Tiamata into it as if performing an acrobatic act.

"Die, and answer the call of demon power."

As Olivia whispered the curse, a black flash from the Demonic Sword penetrated the monster's brain.

-Swoosh!

The lightning-spewing monster suddenly turned its head and began to discharge lightning towards the oncoming monsters.

-Kwarrururururung!

The lightning that once burned Death Knights now began to incinerate the monsters.

As Olivia raised Tiamata, the darkness pouring from the sword enveloped the countless dead monsters.

Beheaded or torn apart, the monsters came back to life through the power of the divine, now rushing towards the other monsters instead.

Biting, tearing, and ripping them apart.

As more enemies died, the corpses increased, and the power of death grew stronger.

The monsters that once engulfed us like a wave now became a wave of undead, charging at the other monsters.

Despair covered by despair.

Wrapped in the power of the divine, Olivia Lanze almost dominated the battlefield.

As the dead monsters rose and began pushing in from our side, the tide of battle turned.

We shifted from protecting the mages from the monsters to pushing back the horde of monsters.

The power to revive the dead, including necromancy.

Anna de Gerna of Class B also joined the battle in this way.

However, Olivia manifested this power through divine might, not magic.

The scale and effect were overwhelming.

But even so, it was just a small breakwater against a tidal wave.

As our battle dragged on, the monsters of Serandia would eventually focus on this minor disturbance one by one, and as the scale of our fight grew, more monsters would be drawn to us.

As the scale of the battle grows, we will reach our limits.

A hundred people are hardly enough to wage war against hundreds of thousands. Even if we have a thousand-to-one force, there are tens of thousands of enemies, and they will continue to be replenished.

But we haven't come here for a suicide mission.

We are buying time.

Time for Liana to summon the tornado.

And.

-Wooong!

The five Archmages.

And the vampires of the Vampire Council to complete their magic.

-Kuruung!

The storm of mana shook the earth as if it would cause an earthquake.

I have never seen it before.

We don't know what will happen when magic of this level, with this level of mana, is unleashed.

When the Archlich Lukren manifested it, numerous shooting stars could be seen pouring out from the void of the torn sky.

And now.

The magic created by the five ancient beings and the mages they have nurtured.

Meteor Shower Summoning.

As if a divine fist struck the mirror called the sky.

The shattered and fragmented blue sky turns to dark night.

The void's darkness, constellations, and the Milky Way were projected within.

And from there, beams of light began to fall.

Amidst the life-and-death battle, it was an unreal spectacle that made one stare blankly for a moment.

Thousands of beams of light, starting from the distant sky.

The white flames of meteors burning as they friction with the atmosphere were so bright that they outshined even the daylight, wrapped in a white light as they fell towards the earth.

Though they seemed slow, in reality, hundreds of beams of light were falling to the ground at a speed faster than sound, continuously dropping from the void's rift.

"Is this…"

Preventing the gate crisis and bringing about the world's destruction?

Isn't this the saying of burning down the house to catch the fleas?

The massive meteors were imposing enough to bring such anxiety.

Slow but surely, the meteors falling towards the earth were gradually increasing in speed.

It's not that they were getting faster.

The closer they got, the more realistically their speed could be felt on the skin.

On the ground, tornadoes raged, and in the sky, meteors rained down.

The hell of monsters was covered and crushed by the hell of natural disasters.

A meteor exploded near the horizon in the distance.

-Flash!

A massive explosion occurred with the flash, covering the area.

That was the beginning.

-Flash! Flash!

-Kuruung!

With the thunderous noise tearing the atmosphere, the meteors began to evaporate the surroundings of Serandia.

I desperately hoped that the flashes would blow away the warp gates as well.

At the same time, I couldn't help but pray that the meteors wouldn't destroy the

world.

The meteors struck the world, and the flying monsters were either swept away by the explosion or torn apart and fell.

The monsters on the ground disappeared along with the craters.

But despairingly, it didn't wipe out all the monsters.

Due to the excessively vast range of impact, there were still monsters overflowing in areas not hit by the meteors, and their numbers were still greater than ours.

-Kukwakwakwang!

And hoping for a meteor to directly hit the warp gate was no different from wishing for a miracle.

We could summon meteors but not aim them.

Even if the warp gate was affected by the meteor's impact, it wouldn't break.

Due to the exceptional durability of the gate itself, it firmly withstood the impact of the meteor collision explosion.

Although I hoped that a massive meteor would strike the warp gate directly, it did not happen.

But the important thing is, since monsters are everywhere, they were undoubtedly being massacred within the falling meteors.

The number of monsters is drastically decreasing, and that is ongoing.

However, monsters pouring out from the warp gate is also ongoing.

I already knew that hoping for the meteor shower to directly strike and destroy the warp gate was like wishing for a stroke of luck.

"Harriet!"

"Yes!"

At my call, Harriet crossed the space and immediately arrived at my side.

"Let's go."

I begin to plunge towards the hellish landscape where meteor showers and stormy rains pour down.

I will destroy the warp gate.

With my own hands.

By the time the allied forces arrive, even if it is not as bad as it is now, the monsters would have replenished enough to be scattered all over the ground.

At this very moment, when the number of monsters is drastically decreasing.

This is the only time when a small elite force can act.

I don't know how far we can go, but we will destroy as much as we can and then flee.

The ones plunging in are Harriet de Saint-Owan and me.

Only the two of us.

-Kwarururung!

The storm of lightning summoned by Liana opened the way ahead for us, who were rushing toward Serandia.

CHAPTER 540

-Boom!

An indescribable roar shakes the ground.

As meteors fall and the earth trembles, it's impossible to maintain one's balance. The monsters standing on the ground face the same challenge.

A tornado has formed far away, but a fierce wind threatens to rip apart anything in its path.

The shockwaves and earthquakes caused by the crashing meteors are accompanied by storms.

Like the monsters unable to move properly, I find myself in a similar situation.

The reason Harriet is with me is simple.

Of the falling meteors, she can use her dimensional gates to redirect any that could cause direct harm to us.

And she's prepared for an emergency evacuation.

-Growl!

But the massive monsters are unaffected by the earthquakes, fierce winds, or shockwaves.

-Crash! Rumble!

Lightning bolts rain down from the sky, striking a monster with a lion's head and a serpent's body. Its flesh twitches a few times, but that's it.

Harriet casts an explosion spell, detonating it right in front of the monster's face, but it only flinches slightly and remains unharmed.

Fire, lightning, magic – nothing works against these monsters.

As the situation intensifies, more monsters with immunity to these attacks emerge.

-Howl!

I thrust my Alsbringer, wrapped in a blue aura, into the giant serpent's body and tear it apart.

Monsters immune to direct physical attacks are rare, especially if it's an aura blade.

Close combat is always the best method of fighting and will remain useful until the end of this battle.

Once.

-Slash!

-Poof!

Twice.

-Stab!

Three times.

-Roar!

As I cut through the serpent's midsection, its massive body, unable to support its weight, snaps in half like a broken tree.

Monsters around us vanish, swept away by the meteor shower and its ensuing explosions. Flying monsters plummet to the ground.

Monsters struck by lightning turn to ash.

Yet, the monstrous horde still screeches, coming closer to kill Harriet and me.

Harriet, who has created a barrier to protect us from the gales, runs alongside me.

-Flash!

Shockwaves, explosions, and flames engulf everything.

We must break through this monstrous wave to destroy the warp gate.

The original world could never be called paradise.

Misery was always present in the original world, just like anywhere else.

But even if the original world wasn't paradise, isn't this hellish landscape a worse alternative?

Even if we clean up this hell and end the gate crisis, paradise won't come.

The world can never return to how it was.

Nevertheless.

Despite all that.

I know we can't achieve paradise, but at least we'll save ourselves from this hell.

-Rumble!

A colossal monster that can fly through these fierce winds spews fire at Harriet and me.

"Reinhardt!"

Harriet's barrier protects us from the fiery breath.

Outside the barrier's range, the flames melt everything in an instant, including the monsters charging at us.

This is just the beginning.

Stronger monsters will appear.

And eventually, we will have to face the last monster.

-Rumble!

As the ground heaves and turns into crimson lava, Harriet and I watch the monsters melt away beyond the fiery breath.

With a deafening crash, the fiery breath that threatened to scorch the land where Harriet and I stood came to a halt. We watched as the monstrous shadow that loomed over the earth was struck by a meteor, losing one of its wings and plummeting to the ground.

Instead of the warp gate, the meteor struck the relatively larger monster, and the resulting shockwave followed as an added bonus.

"Kyaah!"

"Kuuung!"

The slow-falling monster crushed hundreds of other creatures as it descended.

Disaster met disaster head-on.

"Not much time left."

"Right."

Harriet froze the molten ground with her ice magic, clearing a path. We resumed our sprint, the goal not far ahead.

Soon enough, we found our first target.

"Krrrrrr!"

Were the monsters emerging or pouring out?

No, it was more accurate to say they were spilling forth, a tidal wave of flesh pouring from the glowing red warp gate.

The spilled monsters surged forward, most of them crushed to death before they could even stand up properly.

But from the overflowing wave of monsters, some took shape and rose, charging at us as if recognizing their enemies the moment they were born.

Even before reaching the gate, the surging mass of monsters themselves formed a wall we had to break through.

Even if we summoned a meteor shower, conjured a tornado, or created a lightning storm.

If we didn't destroy the accursed warp gate, monsters would overrun the entire area in a matter of days.

We had to crush it.

We had to erase it from this world completely to break the curse that had befallen it.

Paradise wouldn't come, but we could escape hell.

Blue magical lines began to boil from Harriet's entire body.

The shining blue magical lines and the glowing power cartridges on Harriet's necklace soon turned into a near-white light.

Just one chance.

One moment to clear the path.

Only Harriet and I stepped forward to destroy the gate.

The rest of our party decided to provide long-range support only, as it was agreed upon.

Because we were enough on our own.

Facing the wave of flesh, Harriet concentrated her magic at her fingertips.

She compressed her magic to the limit, gathering it all into one point and directing it outward.

There was no name for the spell.

It was just an attack based on Harriet's understanding and control of her mana, compressing and refining it into a concentrated burst.

A simple, honest release of magical power.

"Kuwakwakwakwang!"

But the blast of magical energy that erupted from Harriet's fingertips was a storm of energy in itself.

Even monsters with anti-magic properties were swept away and obliterated by the tempest of her power.

For a moment, a path opened, and the warp gate, enveloped in a red barrier, remained intact.

Could it really withstand such an energy storm?

We knew that the reinforced warp gate couldn't be destroyed by long-range attacks, but was it also impervious to such power? Was there no use even if a meteor struck it directly?

There was no time for despair.

If the first method failed, we'd try the second, and if that failed, the third, the fourth.

We would try until it broke.

There was no time for hesitation.

Instinctively, I charged down the path we'd opened.

Running and running, I aimed for the warp gate that was spewing monsters, pouring all the power I could muster into my sword, Alsbringer.

As I plunged Alsbringer into the warp gate's barrier, I roared.

"Shatter!"

With that, one.

On the outskirts of Serandia.

"What… is this…?"

Kono Lint couldn't close his mouth as he witnessed the scene unfolding before him.

-Whoom

-Flash!

-Whirrrrr

Three enormous, immeasurable tornadoes were swirling around Serandia, while hundreds of lightning bolts rained down from the sky every second, killing monsters. Meteors were also pouring down from the heavens.

Anyone who saw this scene would say that the end of the world had finally arrived; it was a vision of utter destruction.

Suspended high in the sky, Kono Lint was observing the ongoing catastrophe that was befalling Serandia in real-time.

Kono Lint hadn't been assigned to scout this area.

He was here on his own volition.

The high command provided no explanations for the bizarre events happening in the front lines.

At first, Kono Lint had set out to scout the initial few peculiar situations, but since then, only a very small number of units had been deployed for frontline scouting missions.

Some members of the allied forces were already aware that strange events were occurring, and Kono Lint, who had seen the phenomenon with his own eyes, was no exception.

Something too enormous and inexplicable to be the power of the Empire was aiding

them.

Kono Lint had ventured out to scout on his own, hoping to catch a glimpse of whatever it was before the Serandia campaign began.

The sky opened, and meteors rained down.

Lightning struck.

-Wooooooosh!

"Ugh!"

Although Kono Lint was suspended in the sky, a gust of wind so fierce that it threatened to tear his ears apart blew around him.

Struggling to keep his eyes open in the raging storm, Kono Lint tried to take in everything that came into his field of vision.

On the ground, battles were raging.

Facing the tide of monsters was a tiny dot.

A mere speck, but there were those who somehow managed to endure.

Though meager compared to the allied forces, they were undoubtedly fighting.

Kono Lint couldn't properly discern the identities of those too distant. While he could approach them at any time, he didn't dare to.

The battle at the city's outskirts.

And within Serandia city.

-Flash!

Kono Lint clearly saw one of the warp gates shatter in a burst of light.

He remembered it vividly.

The day the sky opened.

The world seemed to have been cursed since that day, and all these calamities began.

The gate incident, known to have originated from the Demon King, was also known to Kono Lint.

But why was the magic used by the Demon King's minions cast on Serandia, and why did one of the warp gates vanish?

Due to the fierce wind, it was difficult to see who or where the battle was taking place.

However, it was possible to guess from the events unfolding.

Meteors fell.

Lightning was summoned.

The Demon King's magic and the supernatural powers of Liana, who disappeared with him.

'Reinhardt…?'

Why were those known to have caused the gate incident desperately trying to destroy the gates?

'Was it Reinhardt who paved the way for the allied forces until now?'

Kono Lint didn't know what was going on behind the scenes.

However, if the forces here belonged to the Demon King,

If these forces, capable of annihilating humanity, were trying to destroy the warp gates,

Wasn't it true that things that should be known were not being revealed?

Wasn't there a truth that people needed to know but didn't?

Something was different.

What people know and what is true often diverge.

It was at that moment that Kono Lint had such a thought.

“Damn rat…”

“!”

Kono Lint widened his eyes as a white-haired old man appeared, the air around him distorted.

“So you were there.”

‘Damn it…!’

The old man's hand reached out to Lint faster than Lint could use spatial teleportation.

‘Reinhardt! We need to get out of here now!’

‘Just one more, one more… ’

‘It's time! Everyone's going to retreat! We've done enough!’

‘Still… just one… just one more… ’

‘No!’

One large warp gate.

One medium.

Two small.

It was a miraculous feat, and enough to provide significant help to the allied forces.

It was fortunate that Harriet was there.

If not, attempting to destroy one more gate could have led to an irreversible disaster.

Our troops returned to Edina after providing support for the designated time, and I reluctantly retreated upon Harriet's insistence.

Yes, it was a miraculous feat.

I retreated after attempting to do something beyond my capabilities, and it was good that our forces suffered no losses.

However.

I couldn't help but furrow my brow at the sight of a familiar face hanging limp on the shoulder of a vampire clan mage.

“What… is this?”

“I caught a scout, your greatness.”

Antirianus had captured Kono Lint, an odd spoil of war.

Antirianus had caught Kono Lint, who had been observing the situation.

His eyes were sharp. How on earth did he spot and capture this guy in that situation?

It was certain that Kono Lint had seen the scene.

He probably had a rough idea that my forces, including myself, were in Serandia.

I couldn't know what Kono Lint thought when he saw it.

But Kono Lint saw something he shouldn't have seen.

I couldn't send him back to the allied forces as is.

If he says the wrong thing, it could cause a huge accident.

So.

“…”

“…”

I looked at Kono Lint, who had just woken up upon our return to Lazak.

As soon as he woke up, he opened his mouth wide and froze.

His eyes rolled around, but he said nothing.

“Planning to run?”

“…!”

He was so easy to read.

Kono Lint could run away anytime due to his abilities.

“It's fine to run, but do you know where you are?”

“Uh, well… I guess not…”

But he didn't know that this place was Lazak, located at the southernmost tip of the Edina Archipelago.

It would take years to wander around the continent using spatial teleportation and find the allied forces' base.

He might be a long-lost acquaintance to me, but it hasn't been that long for me.

So I wasn't that unfamiliar with Kono Lint.

On the other hand, he looked clueless, his eyes rolling around.

“If you run away half-heartedly, you'll likely end up as a skeleton when found. Do you get what I'm saying?”

“Uh… yeah.”

“I don't plan to treat you harshly, and there's no reason to. Let's talk. After a few words, I'll send you back to the allied forces' base safely.”

Kono Lint couldn't handle the situation, his mouth only twitching slightly.

CHAPTER 541

Kono Lint was not imprisoned.

In the first place, Antirianus hadn't ordered him to be captured, and they hadn't intended to treat him as a prisoner.

Initially, Kono Lint didn't even know where the Edina Archipelago was, nor would he understand anything just by looking at the scenery.

Of course, that didn't mean he was in an open space; it was just a bedroom that could be considered a guest room.

There was no exchange of pleasantries like "It's been a while" or "How have you been?"

Neither the situation nor their relationship allowed for such conversations.

"So, you didn't come here on a reconnaissance mission, but rather because you wanted to see the scene for yourself?"

"Uh, uh… Yeah…”

Kono Lint slowly nodded.

Even back at the temple, the three brothers who had looked out for Kono Lint had been quite afraid of me.

That hadn't changed now, if anything, it had gotten worse.

From a school bully to a bully that spanned the entire continent… It would be strange if they weren't afraid, considering I had become something even more than that. Even if these guys had changed from the past, I had changed even more.

Given the circumstances, even being kidnapped, it was inevitable that Kono Lint's complexion would be pale.

It was inevitable that the Alliance would become aware of our existence.

Of course, I knew that Sarkegaar was watching, and even when I was personally stationed at the Alliance base, the rumors didn't spread beyond a certain extent.

Shanafel, the royal mages, and the very few units in charge of frontline reconnaissance missions.

That was about the extent of those who knew the truth, however vaguely.

Everyone else would be aware of something like the empire concealing its strength or hiding some important information.

Kono Lint acted on his own, without orders from his superiors, to scout Serandia and discovered us.

"Whatever you saw, it's true. We're also dealing with the Gate incident in our own way. That's all there is to it."

"…"

At my words, Kono Lint stared at me quietly.

"You're… the Demon King, aren't you?"

"That's right."

It was a known fact now, but as I calmly nodded, Kono Lint's complexion turned even paler.

"Are you responsible for the Gate incident…?"

He stared at me with bated breath.

What should I say?

In the end, it was true.

Various misunderstandings and circumstances had overlapped, but ultimately, it was Eleris who caused the Gate incident.

It was something that happened in order to save me, so I couldn't deny it.

"Technically, yes, but it wasn't what I wanted. That's why I'm doing this."

"…"

"There's no point in discussing the details, and it's a waste of time. But everything that's happened from the moment I entered the temple up until now has been to prevent the Gate incident. It's true that it happened because of me, but it wasn't what I wanted."

Would he believe me?

Just because he saw me fighting the monsters of the Gate with my life on the line, could Kono Lint understand me?

He had also lost his family.

No matter how valid the reasons were, if he focused on the fact that I was responsible for the Gate incident, I couldn't blame him for hating me.

"Why should I… believe you?"

Fearful, Kono Lint stammered, but continued with difficulty.

"Anyway, the Gate Incident… was caused by you to take revenge on humans… And you also want it to end… So you might be helping the allied forces. Once the Gate Incident is over… You might try to destroy humanity like you did in Serandia… Who knows…"

Kono Lint continued to express his doubts about me.

Monsters attack both humans and demons indiscriminately.

The Gate Incident occurred to bring about the destruction of humans.

But if humans were to be destroyed, demons would be next.

So for now, they reluctantly help humans, and after the humans resolve the Gate Incident, they might just betray them and annihilate them.

In reality, it's quite a plausible assumption.

After all, both demons and humans want the Gate Incident to end. So they help the allied forces. They are only using humans until the whole situation is resolved.

"Oh, that's a good idea."

"????"

As I suddenly praised him, Kono Lint lost his composure.

"It'd be a great excuse later on."

"Excuse? What do you mean…?"

There's an old saying, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

If the allied forces learn that the Demon Army is helping humans and become confused, they can temporarily cooperate with the Demon Army, knowing that they will eventually become enemies.

With such an excuse, it might be possible to form an alliance with the allied forces openly.

No, would the allied forces fall apart at the mere idea of joining hands with the Demon King in the first place?

People need a reason to accept the Demon King's cooperation.

A reason that forces them to accept it right away.

People have guessed my intentions on their own, and it's not much different from the reason all of this chaos happened.

So there must be plenty of things that they can guess on their own this time too.

Kono Lint, who couldn't understand what I was talking about at all, was simply dumbfounded.

Kono Lint is in Razak for now, but he doesn't know where he is.

I originally intended to just let him go.

But before that, I need to silence him so he doesn't spread any unnecessary stories.

"First of all, I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone that I'm clearing the path ahead of the allied forces or that I'm destroying warp gates. You didn't see anything."

"Pretend I didn't see anything?"

"Yes. If this gets out, people will think I have some hidden agenda like you picked up earlier. But I don't. I just need the Gate Incident to end. There's no ulterior motive or scheme. My words about wishing the Gate Incident hadn't happened are true. If you don't believe me, there's nothing I can do, but it's true regardless of whether you trust me."

I can explain the series of events leading up to the Gate Incident.

However, it's too verbose, detailed, and there were too many moments where things went awry.

"Really… You didn't want this?"

"Yes."

"So, like what I saw today… you're helping the allied forces in this way?"

"Yes."

This guy has seen it firsthand.

He must have watched my army fight fiercely in Serandia.

In the end, he saw the destruction of several warp gates and the desperate battle against the monsters.

Since he saw it with his own eyes, he should be able to understand the sincerity in my words to some extent.

"Isn't it… If this wasn't your doing… If this wasn't what you wanted… Shouldn't people know about it…?"

Kono Lint looked at me and asked.

"People believe… that all of this is because of you."

"True."

"I've heard that too, but I still find it hard to believe."

"I suppose so."

There must be things that are hard to believe even when seen with one's own eyes.

Could one easily believe it when they're told that, despite being kidnapped and blamed for everything, they've actually done nothing wrong?

Only a fool would believe such a thing.

"So why did this happen… If it's really not your fault… You must be wronged."

"People should know the truth, right? If you're truly… innocent. It's not right like this, is it?"

"It does sound like you're just trying to convince me with your excuses, but I don't understand why you need to justify yourself to me… Convincing me wouldn't really change anything. Why are you telling me this?"

"Well, I don't know. Anyway."

"Let's assume that what you say is true, although I still can't believe it."

"But if what you're saying is really true…"

"It's not your fault, but people are blaming you… Is that… okay?"

Kono Lint asks.

"Would it be okay?"

It's impossible to say it's okay, even if one were to die and come back to life.

It's not okay, and it never will be.

However, one can only accept that there's nothing they can do.

They don't try to do anything about something they can't control.

"So… shouldn't they know? If you're innocent, people are hating you for no reason…"

"It's meaningless."

"Meaningless?"

"If people know, knowing itself becomes the problem."

Ignorance is bliss.

If they know, knowing becomes the problem.

Those who don't know the truth hate and despise me.

But what if they find out the truth?

They won't discard their hatred and loathing for me, but instead, they'll hate Ellen and the Imperial royal family.

They'll despise everyone who kept this secret and pinned the blame on me.

Hatred will only spread, and nothing else can be gained.

It's not that I don't want the truth to spread because of some heroic psyche or noble purpose.

If it does spread, it will only cause division and chaos.

No one benefits from the truth. That's all there is to it.

That's why I don't intend to tell Kono Lint what really happened.

If they find out, there will only be more people to hate.

I didn't want that.

I just wished for the Gate incident to end.

All I could say was that I hoped they would understand or trust me, even though it was an old issue.

"A truth that divides everyone only leads to everyone's downfall."

"…"

"If that's the truth, it's better not to know."

If this problem could be overcome with just my own injustice, I'd accept the injustice.

It's not okay at all, and I can't say it's okay.

But if it's not okay, and that's all there is to it, I have to accept it.

"So, pretend you didn't see it."

The Demon King fights, wishing for the true end of the Gate incident, and doesn't want anything else.

It's a truth that can't be understood, and if understood, it causes more problems.

Sharing this responsibility with others will only increase the objects of hatred, and the ensuing division will only lead to everyone's downfall.

Kono Lint gazes at me silently.

He doesn't speak for a while.

He probably can't believe what I'm saying. No matter how much he has seen me fighting personally, as he said, I also need the end of the Gate incident.

He might accept that I'm only temporarily helping the allied force while postponing the matter of the future for now.

In fact, that might be a more credible story.

To those who have lost something, my words are nothing but empty tales.

Even if it is believable, the fact that I am involved in the Gate Incident does not change.

"You… I always thought you were a weird one…"

Kono Lint chuckles.

"But you're even weirder than I thought."

The word "weird" this time has a slightly different, somewhat positive nuance compared to how it was used before.

"Yeah, who would believe it if I said that the Demon King was risking his life in Serandia to destroy the Gate? They'd probably just think I'm crazy from the war and brush it off."

He laughs bitterly.

After investigating the Royal Class base in the form of a cat, Kono Lint has made a remarkable improvement in his abilities, but he's still a bit of a fool.

Well.

If Kono Lint blabbers about this unbelievable story, most people would not only find it strange but would also think it's a twisted joke.

"So, are you planning to continue doing this?"

"As much as I can."

Since I can't openly cooperate with the allied forces, I'll do what I can from where they can't see me. People might find it suspicious, but I can't just leave things as they are.

Just like I'm doing something now, I'll continue to do something in the future.

Kono Lint stares at me intently.

He nods, seemingly understanding my words about not having seen anything.

"Alright, then I'll send you to the allied base…"

"Hey, but you know…"

"Yeah?"

"Um… uh…"

Kono Lint tilts his head.

His face seems to redden a bit.

"It's not the right timing for this, but…"

What is he trying to say?

Kono Lint scratches his head, then looks at me as if giving up.

"Was that you?"

"…Huh?"

What is 'that'?

What does he mean by 'was that you'?

I couldn't understand what he was talking about in just those two words.

No, it felt like I knew, but I couldn't accept it.

Oh.

No way.

Is it that?

No.

My response was too slow!

My flustered expression gave it away!

"Was it really you?!"

"No, it wasn't! No, what, um, no. What's that and what's this? I have no idea what you're talking about. Absolutely no idea, okay?"

This.

No way.

Should I kill him?

CHAPTER 542

As they spoke about humanity and such, Kono Lint suddenly brought up the cross-dressing contest, a memory that had almost faded away.

When did this guy start to suspect me?

What's worse, my delayed response only reinforced his conviction.

"You! It was you, wasn't it?!"

Kono Lint's face paled, and he quickly retreated.

"Ye-yeah, I knew you were weird, but not just weird, you're even weirder!"

"No, it wasn't me! What even is that?! I have no idea! I don't know anything about it!"

"You… Why would you even have that kind of hobby?"

"It's not a hobby! I said it wasn't me!"

"So, you understood what I was talking about? That means it's true, right? It was you?!"

He got me.

He didn't seem to intend to, but he got me.

When did he start to doubt me?

And why does he still remember it?

"Give me back my innocence, you bastard!"

Kono Lint's face turned white, and he yelled angrily.

"What innocence?! It was a cross-dressing contest from the start!"

"I don't care, just give it back, you crazy bastard!"

Why are we even having this conversation?

Finally, I summoned my Alsbringer in my right hand. Kono Lint's face went white.

“…You shouldn't know about that."

Why am I only threatening him now?

"I'm sorry. Die."

But Kono Lint wasn't scared at all, even with the Alsbringer in my hand.

"Try to touch me with one finger. I'll spread the rumor that the Demon King loves cross-dressing."

"…”

Why?

Why is it like this?

"I don't believe that story more than today, you bastard!"

Who would believe that the Demon King won a cross-dressing contest?!

It's true, but nobody believes it!

I should really kill him.

This is not going to work.

-Whoosh!

As I swung my Alsbringer, Kono Lint moved to the other side of the room.

"You really swung at me! I'll tell Ellen! You crazy pervert!"

"…”

I felt my blood run cold.

It was too late.

He already found out.

Not only Bertus, but now this guy too.

"If you don't let me go unharmed, you'll hear people singing a song about the perverted Demon King who loves cross-dressing in the Alliance's garrison starting tomorrow, you perverted bastard."

It felt like I was losing my grip on sanity.

“…You're calling me a pervert?"

"Well, you are a pervert. If you're not a pervert, then what are you?"

I couldn't refute Kono Lint's words.

There were unavoidable reasons, and I had no choice but to engage in such debauchery.

In the end, wasn't it through those debaucheries that I am here now?

Yes.

I have to admit it now.

"Fine, I'm a pervert."

"What…?"

Upon my calm admission, Kono Lint's face turned even bluer.

"But, do you think that's all?"

“…Huh?"

"Do you think my perverted acts are limited to just that?"

My chilling laughter made Kono Lint, who was stuck to the wall and prepared to run away, tense up.

"You."

"At the beginning of the school year."

"First grade."

"Early on."

"You were eating dessert at a café with some kids…"

"And got confessed to by a girl…"

"Didn't you?"

At my words, Kono Lint's face went pale.

"…What?"

"And after that girl confessed, there was no contact, right?"

I utilize the ring of Sarkegaar.

"Perhaps that girl… looked something like this?"

"Uh… uh-uh-uh-uh-uh?"

A brief silence.

To be honest, there's no need to go this far in discussing this.

I know it's unnecessary.

But.

"You, you… you son of a b*tch!"

My spirit is broken.

Let yours be broken too.

“Why did you do this to me…?”

“Is it because I'm a pervert? That's why, isn't it?”

“I… I…! I thought that maybe, because of that memory, I might be accepted by someone… but now…!”

“There's no way that's true! You've been deceived by this guy. We're done talking. Now, go back to the allied camp quietly!”

“You demon… no, worse than a demon!”

“It doesn't matter since I'm actually worse than a demon, being the Demon King! Hahahahahaha!”

“What have I done to deserve this…! I'll curse you for the rest of my life, Reinhardt!”

“Try it! There are so many people doing that already! Euhuhuhuhahahahahahahaha!”

Kono Lint, with his sanity reduced to zero, could not fully understand the situation.

For some reason, Harriet quietly sent the disheartened Kono Lint back to the allied camp.

Of course, Harriet seemed to be completely clueless while looking at the slightly deranged Reinhardt.

"…”

The vast allied camp, filled with a tense atmosphere, suddenly brought Kono Lint back to reality.

Listening to the sound of grass being trampled and watching soldiers passing by, and the troops preparing for the march, Kono Lint was unsure if he had truly been with

the Demon King up until now.

Everyone hates the Demon King.

If they knew the Demon King was fighting the Gate Incident more desperately than anyone else, very few would believe it.

Kono Lint thought that people like Saviolin Turner, and others in the empire's upper echelons, might know this truth.

Whatever the case, it didn't matter.

A greater truth had deeply penetrated Kono Lint's mind.

Cross-dressing.

The suspicion that lingered in his mind had become a fact.

On top of that, transformation.

Kono Lint, who had learned that Reinhardt could transform, was petrified, only able to slightly move his mouth.

He's a pervert.

Not only does he cross-dress, but he even goes so far as to do that.

What was his intention, his thought process, when he deceived him?

He couldn't understand why he would do such a thing out of malice, to the point that it was terrifying.

It didn't seem like Reinhardt wanted anything from him, like using him or exploiting him for something.

Only to mess with him.

Only to make fun of him.

'Insane… bastard…!'

Kono Lint no longer knew whether the Demon King was good or evil.

The Demon King was a pervert.

That was all.

Upon returning to the Royal Class garrison, Kono Lint saw Ellen in full armor.

"…”

Did Ellen know the truth about Reinhardt?

Kono Lint couldn't tell.

But she wondered if Ellen knew about the other truth.

Kono Lint was sure that Ellen would never know, even if she died and came back to life.

"Um… Ellen."

"Yeah?"

When Kono Lint called her name softly, Ellen looked at her.

Lately, Ellen Artorius seemed a bit more energetic, as if she had something on her mind.

Should he tell Ellen that Reinhardt is actually a cross-dressing pervert who also transforms and messes with his classmates?

Perhaps not.

"No, I thought I had something to say, but I forgot."

"…?"

Ellen tilted her head, then seemed to let it go, looking around.

"By the way, have you seen a cat?"

"A cat…? I haven't seen one…?"

"I see."

Looking for a cat, Ellen quickly left for another place.

A cat.

A cat…

"…"

Fortunately, Kono Lint had not yet thought that Reinhardt could turn into a beast.

A few days later.

The allied forces, having finished preparations, began their advance.

It was more of a march than an advance. The path to their destination, Serandia, was a long one.

But it was not a leisurely march like any other.

They were entering the heart of enemy territory, where monsters continuously emerged.

The march itself was already a battle.

-Boom! Crash!

-Flash!

-Rumble!

Battles were, of course, breaking out, and the whole army was on alert, prepared for monsters that might ambush them from the side during the march.

At the end of the march, rest awaited not, but an even more enormous battle.

At the time when the army was most exhausted, they had to face the most arduous battle.

The march that penetrated enemy lines was a continuous series of advances and battles, with the sounds of fighting never ceasing day and night.

The army had to fight while advancing, and even fight while sleeping.

One small blessing was that the weather did not freeze the soldiers amidst the harsh winter.

Although it was not quite midsummer, the cool autumn-like climate was optimal. Even so, there was nothing that could be done about the fatigue from the march itself and the consecutive battles.

“Thank goodness the weather is good…”

“What would have happened if it had snowed…”

“Heaven is helping us.”

As they approached the main strategic objective, Serandia, the number of monsters could only increase.

“The Empire's mobile forces have already destroyed one large, one medium, and one small warp gate each through preemptive strikes. This is expected to make the assault on Serandia somewhat easier.”

The demon army's strategy had already been confirmed by the high command.

This lie would gradually become an increasingly obvious one. Even those who did not know the truth would soon realize that there was a force aiding this war, and they would also come to recognize that it was the Demon King's army.

It was no different from shaking hands with a devil, and if this were to be exposed, the allied forces might crumble.

But it was too sweet a temptation.

Silence and a few lies now would allow them to preserve their combat strength and

save many lives.

Everyone sensed that Emperor Bertus of the Empire and the high command were hiding a crucial truth, but no one sought to know it.

Because it was true that someone's help was making the war easier, whoever it was.

Among those who remained silent was Louise von Schwarz, who occupied a place in the mobile high command.

Was music really necessary in a war?

It was unclear whether music itself was needed, but there could be no doubt that sound was essential.

-Boom boom boom boom

The deep resonance of the war drum instinctively stirred something in people, driving them into a frenzy.

It was said that the sound of a drum carried a soul within it.

Made from the skin of a living creature, it is perhaps natural to believe that the drums carry such a spirit within them.

Whether their sound truly contains a soul is unknown, but there is no doubt that they have a role in bewitching the human spirit.

In other battlefields, it may not be necessary, but in this special battlefield, the sound of the drums is even more essential.

-Kiaaaaaak!

-Growwwwwl!

-Kieeeeeeee!

Only then can they hope to drive away the monstrous roars that boil up from the

waves of giant creatures surging from beneath the hill.

They must drive away the fear that stems from sound with sound itself.

The allied forces, having completed their long march, finally reach the battlefield and look down upon Serandia, which they must conquer and occupy.

The replenished monsters are boiling in a crater created by a meteor shower, regenerating in a place ravaged by tornadoes.

-Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

The drummers beat the drums relentlessly, as if their hands would split open.

As if driving away the monsters' roars would actually make the monsters retreat.

They drive away the pitch-black boiling monsters and shatter the warp gate.

The seemingly impossible task isn't the end; they must move on to the next battlefield.

At any moment, in a fate of unknown death from the fangs and claws of the monsters.

Onto the next, and the next, and the one after that.

Beyond the next and the next.

The army of death, which must reach the final battlefield, faces its first despair.

There is no need for thought.

Despair is worthless.

Forget.

They must fight.

As if to say, think of nothing but fighting right now.

-Boom! Boom! Boom!

The sound of the drums anesthetizes the soldiers.

Within the reverberation that dyes their souls with rage, the soldiers' eyes hold despair, fear, and a premonition of death.

Anger swells.

There is nowhere to retreat.

Behind, beside, and ahead, there is only death.

There is no place for humanity to retreat any longer.

So, onward.

If death awaits everywhere, let them fall in the direction closest to the survival and victory of all.

After all, the march was meant for this purpose.

Choose life over death.

Rage over sorrow.

Despair over…

Madness.

Give in to it.

-Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

The sound embedded in the war drum.

And then.

-"O, Almighty and great Five Gods, grant us protection… watch over us and defend us, grant us peace and safety…"

Many soldiers cried out the names of the gods like madmen.

-"To our enemies…”

The eyes of the soldiers, intoxicated by fear and despair, glowed strangely.

-"To the enemies of humanity…”

In despair and impossibility, they could only seek the absolute beings.

-"Death…”

They prayed for protection.

It wasn't only those who had lost their reason, calling out the names of the gods.

-"May Als protect us!"

-Boom! Boom! Boom!

Following the war cries of the Holy Knights of the god of war, a red aura began to pour from the sky, enveloping the vast allied forces.

O god of war.

O god of war who chose the Demon King.

Please lighten our steps today.

-Boom!

The drummers of despair played the deathly drums, and everyone entrusted their souls to it.

The commanders of each army raised their swords.

Though they may break, they will not fall.

All troops!

They may be broken.

Charge!

They may have fallen.

Ahhhhhhhhh!

They fight.

For they must survive.

—---

Humanity pours down from the hill below.

Monsters surge up the hill, streaking across the sky.

And the heavens.

Rumble!

From the rent sky, a rain of deathly flames begins to descend.

Atop the massive crimson crystal tower, a small girl reaches out toward the waves of monsters.

Standing on the Arc Crystal, Redina speaks.

"We can do this."

Roar!

Hellish fires pour down like lightning upon the monstrous tide.

"We can survive."

The little mage was summoning disaster from the sky.

CHAPTER 543

The battle for Serandia

Monsters spewed flames and lightning from their mouths, while humans unleashed bolts of lightning and fire from their fingertips.

On the battlefield where winter had retreated, there was little difference between the lives of humans and monsters.

Flames, impossible to discern whether they came from the monsters or the mages, intertwined and exploded in the sky. In the rear, artillery weapons crushed, burned, or froze the monsters to death.

-Screech!

A soldier, cleaved in half at the waist by a monster's jaws, died without even a chance to scream.

-Splash!

Then, a heavy hammer struck the monster's skull, shattering it in an instant.

-Bang!

A monster lunging at the hammer-wielder was met with a blinding white shield, its head smashed against it.

-Bang! Splash!

After pushing the monster back with his shield, the knight looked around, his hammer dripping with gore.

-Groan!

White light radiated from the knight's body, beginning to heal the wounds of the injured soldiers around him.

Yet, what good would it do to heal these wounds?

Adriana could only watch as a soldier, whose shoulder was miraculously reattached by her divine power, charged at another monster, only to have his head crushed in its jaws.

“Huff!”

The knights were the medics and assault troops of the battlefield.

They were the ones who could heal critically injured soldiers, allowing them to flee on their own feet.

Not only that, they were the knights who could restore combat strength by healing wounded soldiers on the battlefield.

However, the knights also had to witness the most futile loss of lives they had saved.

Their hope only intensified their despair.

If they didn't have the power to heal, they could simply focus on fighting after swallowing their tears for the horribly injured.

But the knights had to save many lives and watch them vanish before their eyes.

They had been watching lives disappear in this brutal battlefield, as they fought and saved people during the Gate Crisis.

Why hadn't they shed tears?

They had cried out in grief countless times.

But tears couldn't bring back the dead.

Wailing could only serve as a memory for those who had vanished.

Only strength.

Only fighting.

Only this heavy, blunt hammer.

This Hammer of Judgment, which she had switched to after realizing that it was easier to crush monsters than to kill them with a sword.

This violence, which tore and smashed enemies, was the only line of goodness and the only justice in this cruel battlefield.

-Splash!

“Hrrraaaah!”

-Splat!

Adriana, who had learned that there was no justice other than killing enemies, swung her Hammer of Judgment.

Adriana was powerful.

Although not a Master Class, she had joined the ranks of superhumans through Moonshine, and her divine power to strengthen her body made her even more exceptional.

Comparing the capabilities of ordinary soldiers with Adriana was impossible.

But she couldn't save everyone.

She had witnessed countless lives, saved only to fade away.

Through countless battles, she had learned that fighting while trying to protect others was futile.

Fighting to protect others had often put her in danger as well.

However.

Still.

Adriana couldn't turn her back on those who had fallen.

Just like when she had reached out to help a despised junior who was about to make a reckless attempt, knowing that there was no need for it.

Adriana hadn't changed.

She couldn't change.

-Roar!

“!”

The moment she saw the monstrous creature, as large as a bison, charging towards the fallen soldier with its dark, gleaming fangs, Adriana was already standing in its way, blocking its path to the soldier.

- Thud!

"Ugh!"

Unable to withstand the weight of the charging creature, Adriana was flung back, tumbling across the ground.

She had fallen.

In the midst of battle, losing one's footing could mean death before getting a chance to stand back up.

Gulping for air from the impact transmitted through her shield, Adriana saw the monster lunging at her with its maw wide open, aiming straight for her neck.

She hadn't regained her proper stance, she couldn't offer her neck, and her weapon was lost.

Adriana thrust her right arm into the monster's gaping maw.

- Crunch!

"Argh… ugh!"

- Crackle! Crackle!

Her plate armor crumpled pathetically.

- Creak! Creak!

Despite the divine protection imbued in her armor, the monster's teeth tore into Adriana's right arm without resistance.

Adriana was strong, but monsters were unpredictable in their strength.

Some were pathetically weak, but others could pierce through armor with divine protection and Magic Body Strengthening just by biting.

At this rate, her arm would be ripped off, and her life would follow.

"Ugh…!"

- Thump!

Even as she lay on the ground, with the monster crushing her arm in real time before her eyes.

- Thump! Thump!

- Crackle! Crackle!

Adriana relentlessly bashed the monster's head with her shield, which hung on her left arm.

It was a battle of whether her arm would break first or the monster's head.

- Crack!

"Ugh… Aaah…!"

- Thwack! Thwack! Thwack! Thud!

- Gasp… ack…

One side of the monster's head shattered, and its body went limp.

Adriana tried to pry open the jaws of the monster that, even in death, refused to let go of her arm.

There was more than one enemy.

She had to get up.

If she didn't, she would die.

Adriana desperately tried to pry open the jaws of the dead monster that seemed to have clenched even tighter.

No one would be concerned for her.

On the battlefield, everyone was essentially alone.

The soldier Adriana had saved had already been bitten in the neck by another monster, blood spurting from the wound, rendering her previous efforts futile.

Countless people fought together, but most were preoccupied with their own survival. Those who fought to protect others, like Adriana, were few and far between.

- Roar!

And then, before Adriana could extract her arm from the monster's mouth, she saw another monster charging across the battlefield.

It was roughly six meters in size.

A common soldier couldn't handle it.

It wasn't coming specifically for her, but with every step, dozens of soldiers were sent flying, crushed beneath its feet.

The monster's path went straight through her.

"Ah… ugh! Ugh!"

She had to somehow open the jaws of the dead monster to get out of the incoming monster's path or find a way to counter it.

It would be too late at this rate.

Should she sacrifice her arm?

Losing an arm was better than dying.

But how could she cut off her arm in this situation?

The monster was already upon her.

And as Adriana gritted her teeth, preparing to strike her own elbow with the sharp edge of the shield she had used to crush the monster's head.

- Fizzzz!

A spark, akin to lightning, flashed in midair, and something appeared.

What emerged from the spatial displacement was a colossal metallic gray mass, comparable in size to a giant.

Whoosh!

Splash!

Adriana stared blankly as the giant's head collided with the massive gray metal, shattering it into pieces.

"Golem…”

A giant iron golem appeared and began to trample and crush the monsters.

It's a golem!

The Archduke's golem!

Adriana's life had been saved by the appearance of the golem, and as the other soldiers witnessed the giant golem fighting alongside them on the battlefield, they cheered.

Archduke of Saint Owan.

Despite his disgrace due to his youngest daughter's betrayal, no one could deny the skill of the Archduke and the mages of Saint Owan Duchy.

In fact, the Archduke, who had participated in the Great Demon War, now used the golem that once trampled demons to crush the monsters emerging from the Gate.

Screech!

Growl!

Adriana watched the golems fighting valiantly in front of her, as she wrenched open a monster's jaws with her shield.

"Ugh… ugh!"

She could feel her right arm's bone completely shattered.

Moan!

Adriana could heal herself just as she could heal others.

With her healed arm, Adriana picked up her fallen hammer and stood up.

The Duchy's golem fought alongside them.

The iron golem battled the massive monsters, devastating the battlefield as befitted its huge form.

Adriana chased after the iron golem, running.

As she ran, she muttered a prayer.

"O gods."

The young priestess spoke.

"The five great gods."

"With these tears."

"With this blood."

"With so many tears."

"With so much blood."

"What exactly do you wish to accomplish?"

In her despair, amidst the blood of monsters and humans, Adriana cried out, her eyes still alive.

How beautiful must the paradise created from tears and blood be?

Why do the gods desire so much death and tears?

Thud!

Staring blankly at the battlefield, Adriana struggled to set her bloodstained hammer down amidst the piles of flesh from the fallen and crushed monsters.

Clang! Crash!

The giant golem swept across the battlefield, opening a path so quickly that the sky suddenly darkened and something fell to the ground like an arrow.

Growl

"A… dragon…?"

A monster with a pair of wings, a massive body, and a lizard-like head.

The creature was already three times larger than the huge iron golem, and its impact on the ground caused numerous soldiers and monsters to stagger or fall.

The dragon, massive enough to look down upon the over six-meter-tall monster as if it were a toy, opened its jaws toward the iron golem.

Roar!

Rumble!

Crimson flames burst from the dragon's maw, pouring down on the iron golem.

"Ah…"

The iron golem, which had seemed capable of breaking through the waves of monsters and pulverizing them all, was turned into molten metal and disappeared under the fiery breath of an even more enormous creature.

A powerful monster.

A creation of humans, even more potent.

But an even more immense and formidable monster.

Humans are strong, but monsters can be anything.

Adriana could only freeze as she saw the molten remains of the golem and the dragon standing before her like a mountain.

Monsters do not fall into despair, but humans do.

Adriana gripped her hammer with trembling hands.

And she held her shield.

Though it was hopeless, she could not fall.

Adriana, clad in protective armor, charges towards the dragon opening its jaws wide to face her.

Rumble!

Seeing the fiery breath that had melted even the iron golem pour down on her, Adriana predicts the path of the flames and leaps to the side.

Her small stature is a disadvantage.

It might be impossible to win because of her size.

But her size could also grant her a little more freedom from the monster's attacks.

Discussing the odds of victory is foolish.

If every battle is a roll of the dice between life and death.

In war, it is the fate of a soldier to eventually face death's backside, as they must fight countless battles.

Despite knowing that, Adriana dodges the ground-melting flames, and soon reaches the massive dragon's jawline.

She knows that the backside of death will eventually show itself.

But she's decided to fight.

Just as she once offered salvation to those destined to die again.

She continues this foolish battle.

Foolishly determined.

"Ha!"

Reaching the monster's face, Adriana leaps up from beneath it, using the dragon's horns as a handle to climb atop its head.

The heat from the dragon's enormous head, even larger than her own body, was unbearable for any human, perhaps due to the iron-melting flames it spat.

Squeal!

Holding the dragon's horn with her left hand, Adriana strikes the dragon's head with the hammer in her right hand.

Roar!

There's no time for doubt about its effectiveness.

Even if she can't defeat it, preventing it from spewing flames will save someone's life.

Even if they die next time, they won't die now.

That's enough.

She can't do more than that, but if she can protect them now, that's enough.

Roar!

Adriana grips the horn with her left hand to avoid falling from the dragon's violently shaking head, and swings her hammer down with her right hand.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Swords and spears wouldn't penetrate this thick hide.

Even most magic would likely fail to harm this monster.

To kill a monster with impenetrable skin, Adriana abandoned her sword.

She chose the hammer to kill such a monster, discarding her long-trained swordsmanship.

Whoosh!

In the midst of the disorienting shaking, Adriana raises her hammer.

Bang!

O gods.

Bang!

If everything is at your disposal, then what lies at the end of all this?

O gods.

Squeal!

Five Gods.

Spat!

I despise you.

Roar!

The hammering of the priest who hates the gods continues in order to shatter the massive rock called a dragon.

The world might not belong to humans.

But at least, it should belong to the living.

Not to these destructive creatures with nothing but their instincts.

That's not something that can be called a world.

"Raaaaaaaaaaah!"

Towards the out-of-order beings.

Towards the beasts of destruction that lack the path of a living being.

An intense white light wraps around the hammer that Adriana raises high toward the sky.

To annihilate the out-of-order beings.

Towards the beast, no different from a machine that lacks the concept of order.

Adriana strikes down with her hammer, filled with pure hatred.

Squeak!

As the hammer comes crashing down, a white bolt of lightning pierces through the sky and penetrates the dragon's head.

Roar!

The dragon, which had raised its head with a sound like a dying scream, collapses along with its massive body.

Grumble…

"Haa… Haa… Haa…"

Adriana lands just before the monster's head touches the ground, staring in disbelief at what she has just done.

She cannot understand what has happened.

But the monster is dead, its head pierced right in the center by the hammer.

It had fallen to a pitiful weapon that, though heavy, was nothing more than a toothpick compared to the monster's massive body.

"Haa… Haa…"

Catching her breath, Adriana looks at herself as if she had just performed a miracle and meets the gaze of countless soldiers.

-Ohhh…

-By the Five Gods…

Feeling something from Adriana, who is surrounded by the white light that signifies divine proof, the soldiers show reverence to the divine even in the midst of this brutal battle.

Is it a miracle?

Is this what they call a miracle?

Adriana stares blankly at the sky above the battlefield.

The fight is not over just because a giant monster has died.

Such miracles happen frequently on battlefields, and countless tragedies unfold beyond measure.

As long as the end of the war does not arrive, these monsters will continue to appear.

Is there really an end to this fight, where countless creatures like this emerge?

A desperate battlefield filled with waves of monsters, fire, lightning, and cold.

Is there truly an exit in this hell where slaughter is everywhere?

Adriana, who has slain the dragon, falls into despair.

Seeing similar-sized or even larger monsters surging in, one can only fall into despair.

How many more miracles are needed?

Will it ever end?

Lost in the despair that follows the miracle, Adriana becomes dazed.

The end of this hell.

Anyone will do.

The conclusion of this hell.

Witnessing death, both killing and being killed, is increasingly exhausting.

The end of this world.

The final destination of pain, despair, and fear.

Bring it forth.

-Boom!

-Ku-ku-ku-boom!

From afar.

Adriana sees dozens of flashes crossing the battlefield.

-Swoosh!

-Crack!

Those dozens of beams of light cut through, crush, and shatter every monster they touch, racing past the soldiers like arrows.

They are not mere flashes.

Beings imbued with blue mana throughout their bodies.

Superhumans among superhumans.

The strongest of mankind, who have reached the Master Class, are coming.

Among those beams of light, Adriana sees one of them rushing past her, grazing her.

Dozens of flashes trample over the corpse of the dragon that Adriana had brought down.

One of those flashes.

“…Ellen."

Ellen Artorius.

Adriana clearly felt the gaze of someone with emotionless eyes briefly directed at her before looking forward again.

-Whoosh!

Despite being a person, the charge was so rough and agile that it created a whirlwind.

The hero, Ellen Artorius, leads a guerrilla unit composed of Master Class fighters and breaks through the battlefield.

Every monster in their path explodes, shatters, is sliced, and trampled, disappearing.

That eerily calm and composed expression.

In that indifference, Adriana finds a sense of relief.

It's no different for the other soldiers.

The hero's emotionless expression is neither flustered, scared, sad, nor overly confident.

People trust the hero's calmness.

They place their faith in that composure, in that inhuman expression of the hero.

Transcending humanity, a bizarre trust arises in the belief that they will accomplish what humans cannot. This trust soon turns into faith through the impossible feats the hero achieves.

The seemingly emotionless hero.

The one who will bring an end to all of this.

Swoosh!

Ellen Artorius leaps high into the air and swings her sword just once at a monster as large as a mountain.

Slash!

From her vastly elongated Void Blade, a curtain of darkness grazes the colossal beast, and with just one pass, it falls, spewing blood.

Adriana had to risk her life to fight a monster smaller than that.

But for Ellen Artorius, it seemed that one blow was enough to subdue a mountainous creature.

Rumble!

And then, the whip of flames pouring from the hero's sun’s cloak crashes to the ground, instantly burning and killing thousands of monsters.

A calm expression, yet an intense power.

Overwhelming force.

The hero pierces through the waves of monsters and advances.

Furthermore, the superhumans she leads cut through the battlefield like beams of light.

Overwhelming strength.

Overwhelming protection.

How could people not find hope in Ellen?

The miracle Adriana caused is a part of Ellen's daily life.

The monsters that Adriana could only kill by causing a miracle are slain with a single blow from Ellen.

That's why she is called the hero.

Watching the hero and her strike force cutting through the waves of monsters, Adriana feels it.

Though there may be no hope.

It might be possible with them.

If they are that strong, the end of this war might come.

That's why the hero inevitably becomes a matter of faith.

They will destroy the Warp Gate.

They will bring an end to everything.

People believe that they will put an end to the era of sorrow and hatred.

"Phew…”

Adriana lifts her hammer once more.

CHAPTER 544

Redina was responsible for providing massive magical bombardment support to the needed areas while overlooking the battlefield.

The spot with a bird's-eye view of the vast battlefield had always been Redina's, where she had to decide whether to support a particular place based on her own judgment.

The situation on the battlefield was always changing, and Redina had to make decisions on her own.

She had to decide at all times.

To help or not to help.

Using telescope magic, she analyzed the situation on the battlefield and helped where it was most needed.

Helping where it was most needed meant that some places would not receive assistance.

She had to judge between important units and less important ones.

She would leave some units to be annihilated while supporting more critical locations and more important troops.

Saving some while watching the deaths of others was Redina's job, and she had to make that choice every minute, every second.

Her decisions were based on intuition, not the kind that could be reached through deliberation and review.

The fact that her judgment could be wrong sometimes plunged Redina into her greatest fear, and it was inevitable that she had made mistakes.

The power of the Arc Crystal was not infinite.

Thus, countless situations arose where she had to turn away from someone.

The moment Redina chose to exclude someone based on the battlefield's needs, she couldn't help but think of those dying because of her decisions, rather than those she had saved.

Grrrr!

As she spread dozens of shockwaves to neutralize the swarm of flying monsters approaching the rear base, Redina couldn't help but watch the soldiers being crushed and killed by the falling debris of the defeated creatures.

If she had left the monsters unattended, the artillery would have been neutralized, causing even greater damage.

Nevertheless, the fact remained that soldiers had died due to Redina's magic.

"…"

She might be known as the magician who killed the most monsters.

In the end, however, Redina would be the magician who killed the most people.

With a heavy heart, Redina looked at the battlefield.

She had no choice but to witness countless deaths.

It was a chaotic battlefield filled with death and slaughter.

Ludwig, too, couldn't help but have his place amidst that death and carnage.

Thud! Thump!

Wrapped in blue mana, Ludwig was also killing monsters.

A lot had changed since the time when Magic Body Strengthening had just become possible.

With the optimized magic power from Moonshine, Ludwig achieved optimal Magic Body Strengthening, just like other Royal Class members.

Even if he didn't reach the Master Class, Ludwig was undeniably a superhuman.

Gasp!

He stabbed with his sword, struck with a pommel, and kicked.

The smaller monsters couldn't help but be neutralized by Ludwig's gestures and kicks.

In such a battlefield, Ludwig's talent couldn't help but shine.

"Heugh!"

Swoosh!

He never tired.

Having only the talent of stamina, Ludwig never neglected to hone that ability.

However, not even Ludwig could face all the monsters.

Grrrrraaah!

“Please, save me!”

The cacophony of monsters' roars and human screams mixed in a frenzy echoed from every corner of the battlefield.

Naturally, not all were fighting.

“Ah, ah… ah… ah…”

Some had lost their minds, dropped their weapons in fear, and crawled on the ground.

“My leg… my leg…”

There were those who had suffered fatal injuries, unable to receive healing help and slowly dying.

In this hell where countless people met their end, treated worse than dogs, Ludwig stood his ground, wielding the swords and spears of the fallen against the surging wave of monsters.

Why must such things happen?

Why must there be such events?

Why must these people die so cruelly?

Gritting his teeth, Ludwig does the only thing he can do since he cannot save the fallen ones: he kills monsters.

That is the one unique good left in this world. The other good is the root cause of this situation: the death of the Demon King.

But, Ludwig cannot face the terrifyingly powerful Demon King.

That is the hero's role.

So, killing monsters.

Killing the monsters he can, facing those within his capability, that is the one and only righteousness and goodness that Ludwig can enact himself.

Some have collapsed, moaning in pain, others have lost their minds, but those who still hold their weapons and haven't given up must be thinking similarly to Ludwig.

They fight against the calamity because it is too bitter and unjust to fall like this, unable to let go of their weapons.

From afar, Ludwig saw something leap amidst the waves of monsters.

-Whiiiik!

Something, a black sphere-like object, flew in and crashed among the soldiers.

-Kuwung!

It wasn't a bullet or a shell; it was a monster.

The monster, curled up like a ball, unfolded its body, resembling a scorpion.

Where its face should have been, there was only a dark hole, brimming with pitch-black tentacles.

-Kiiiiiiiaaaaaa!

"Ugh!"

From the abyss-like hole, a ferocious and eerie screech erupted, causing the surrounding soldiers and Ludwig, who was relatively far away, to lose their balance.

The soldiers nearby began to fall, blood pouring from their eyes, ears, and mouths, just from hearing the cursed shriek.

-Kiiiiiiiaaaaaa!

"Ughhhhh!"

In the midst of agonizing pain, as if his head was being torn apart, Ludwig gritted his teeth.

Monsters were diverse.

Some spewed flames and lightning, while others attacked the mind.

It was impossible to know what form of attack they'd use, and some were so illogical.

Even with their ears covered, the soldiers could not regain their composure as the shriek of terror seeped through, and Ludwig was no exception.

-Thud! Crunch!

The approaching monsters trampled and crushed the fallen soldiers.

They were on the verge of being annihilated by this irrational assault, and Ludwig

was no exception.

At that moment,

-Kiiiiiiiaaaaaa!

With her wild, red hair billowing, someone charged straight into the source of the terrifying scream.

Despite everyone else vomiting blood and dying upon hearing the scream up close, the girl with red hair seemed unaffected as she rushed toward the center of the scream.

-Whoosh!

She thrust her sword into the gaping abyss and twisted it.

-Crunch! Crackle!

The monster was swiftly dismantled and fell.

The girl who had slain the monster approached Ludwig, covered in a blue aura.

"Are you alright?"

"Scarlett…”

"Get up. We don't have time for this."

"Alright."

Ludwig got up, feeling the lingering screams echoing in his head, and steadied himself.

A talent called immunity.

It applied to monsters as well.

For some reason, the strange powers wielded by monsters had no effect on Scarlett.

Neither flames, nor lightning, nor the terrifying force that dominated the mind.

Scarlett was immune to the power of all the monsters, as long as they didn't launch a direct attack.

For this reason, Scarlett sought out and killed monsters that wielded unreasonably strong powers.

Without Scarlett, even the formidable Ludwig would have had no choice but to succumb to death.

She saved not only countless soldiers but also Ludwig's life.

However, they must continue fighting to avoid the next crisis.

Before Ludwig could fully stand, Scarlett had already plunged into the midst of the battlefield.

Monsters were everywhere.

Scarlett's immunity protected her from the strange powers of the monsters, but it couldn't shield her from the physical strength of the monsters that grabbed, tore, and bit.

Ddddddd

The ground moaned.

"An earthquake?"

Now, monsters that caused earthquakes appeared as well.

No.

Ddddddddd!

Ludwig, looking at the trembling ground that followed the growing turmoil and rumble of the earth, realized that this was not the result of some special power.

In a situation where an unknown enemy could appear, intuition was most important.

Intuitive and immediate situational judgment, and then action.

When Ludwig realized that the massive rumbling of the ground was not an earthquake but something approaching from underground.

And when he saw that the enormous rumbling had reached the ground beneath Scarlett's feet.

"Scarlett! Get out of the way!"

"…!"

Boom!

Ludwig watched as a giant, grotesque worm with a gaping maw erupted from the ground, swallowing up Scarlett, along with dozens of monsters and soldiers, as it leaped out.

CHAPTER 545

The cause of the earthquake was merely the vibrations caused by a colossal monster crawling beneath the earth.

And that massive creature burst out of the ground, swallowing vast expanses of land in the process.

- Kweeeek!

As a result, no matter how fast or well-prepared they were, the gigantic worm that had swallowed soldiers, the monster, and even Scarlett in an instant, bared its hundreds, if not thousands, of thorn-like teeth and roared.

Scarlett was swallowed whole.

"No!"

He couldn't let Scarlett, who had just saved his life, die such a futile death.

He had no idea how to confront this enormous creature.

Ludwig gripped his sword and charged toward the giant worm.

Scarlett, unlike other soldiers, could use Magic Body Strengthening to enhance her strength.

He didn't know how long she could endure, but she should be able to hold out a little longer than the others inside the belly of that colossal worm.

Before that.

He needed to dismantle the monster before Scarlett ran out of breath.

The sword in his right hand was insignificant compared to the creature's massive body.

But he had no choice. Ludwig ran, watching the giant worm bury its face into the ground, exposing its enormous head and devouring the soldiers whose spirits were broken.

He didn't know how to cut it, but he slashed at it anyway.

Determined to pull Scarlett out, even if it meant diving into the monster's mouth, he charged.

- Kweeeek!

After dodging its attack, Ludwig thrust his sword toward the monster's head.

- Thud!

"Ku… ugh!"

It penetrated.

The sword wasn't useless.

However, the overwhelming size of the creature made it extremely difficult.

Could he dismantle the monster's body by stabbing it all day?

Could he save Scarlett, who was swallowed by the monster?

- Whoooooong!

"Ugh!"

As the monster lifted its head, Ludwig, who had been clinging to the creature with his sword impaled in its flesh, was suddenly suspended in mid-air.

The monster was attempting to shake off the human hanging from its body with a sword embedded in it.

By doing so, it had inadvertently blocked its movements, saving many lives.

But it wasn't enough.

He needed to cut through more.

He needed to dig deeper into its flesh and pull Scarlett out.

Bloodshot eyes filled Ludwig's vision.

- Thud! Thud! Thud!

He decided to do all he could, even if it was impossible.

Gritting his teeth, Ludwig relentlessly stabbed his sword.

If he had been a Master-class.

If he had been stronger.

Ludwig gritted his teeth, swinging his sword to save Scarlett before her life was extinguished, but it was all in vain.

The truth was always cruel.

What couldn't be done, simply couldn't be done.

- Kuwoong!

"Gah!"

The monster intentionally slammed its head against the ground, shaking Ludwig off.

- Kweeeek!

It roared at the now vulnerable Ludwig.

It seemed intent on swallowing the annoying insect that had been pestering it.

At that very moment, when the monster's terrifying maw was about to descend upon him.

- Tukkak!

- Kyeeeeek!

A massive ice spear, thrown from somewhere, impaled the worm's mouth, bending it backward with great force.

- Bang! Crash!

Following that, numerous attack spells began to rain down on the monster's mouth, which had emerged from the ground without warning.

The battle was desperate, but he wasn't fighting alone.

Magicians who had been monitoring the situation from the rear saw the appearance of the monster that required urgent intervention and supported him with their magic.

- Kweeeek

The worm was disintegrating in real time.

Humans were never weak.

Nor was the power gathered from the remnants of human strength.

The last army of humanity was strong because it was their last stand.

And then.

"Move, Ludwig!"

Ludwig heard Delphin Izzard's voice amidst the screams of the monsters.

When he looked back, there was Delphin, a bow in hand and string drawn.

Just as a sword was useless against those creatures, Delphin's arrows were no different.

However, these were no ordinary arrows.

The arrows of Delphin Izzard, who had awakened the ancient power of elemental

magic, could never be ordinary.

-Whoooosh!

The arrow, condensed with the force of wind, let out a bizarre cry.

As the arrow imbued with the power of the elementals was released, the space distorted.

-Boom!

With an explosion-like roar, the arrow was fired at the worm.

-Blam!

Ludwig watched in astonishment as the monster's mouth was torn apart by the shockwave released by the massive force of the wind compressed within the arrow.

In the midst of the scattered blood and flesh, Ludwig saw Scarlett, covered in the monster's blood.

She was alive.

Scarlett, who had been holding on with a blue mana barrier around her body, fell to the front of the battlefield.

The other soldiers who had been swallowed along with her were already torn to shreds, but Scarlett was unharmed.

However, she was unconscious.

The blue mana, the Magic Body Strengthening, protected Scarlett, but it was fading away.

To make matters worse, Scarlett fell not in the direction of the allied soldiers but towards the oncoming horde of monsters, as if pushed away.

"No!"

Although the magicians' support fire and Delphin's power had helped Scarlett escape

from the monster's body, she would be torn apart by the approaching monsters.

She was surrounded.

Weaponless, Scarlett lay limp in the midst of the monsters closing in from all sides.

Ludwig ran.

"Ludwig! No!"

Delphin cried out, realizing Ludwig was attempting a reckless charge.

But Ludwig ran, gripping a spear he had pulled from a dead soldier's body.

He couldn't face the giant monster, but he could kill what he was able to.

-Thud! Bang! Crash!

With a human body that charged like a tank, Ludwig made his way through.

He stabbed with the spear, punched with his fist, and kicked with his legs.

He ran towards Scarlett, who was being engulfed by the wave of monsters.

Many had died in a moment of carelessness, a sudden turn of events, or an instant of injustice.

Grinding his teeth, Ludwig picked up the weapons of the dead, discarded them when they broke, and continued his charge with new weapons.

Delphin, realizing she couldn't stop Ludwig, began to support him with arrows carrying fire, lightning, and wind.

If Scarlett was swallowed by the wave of monsters, there would be no next time.

"Get… away!"

Hoping for help from the magicians would be the same as hoping for luck, but luck had no place on a battlefield filled with misfortune. Ludwig ran, piercing through the wave of monsters.

-Crash!

Even as Delphin pierced the monsters with arrows carrying the power of the elementals, other monsters filled the empty spaces.

Stabbing, slashing, and crushing, Ludwig finally reached the fallen Scarlett and managed to lift her up.

But it wasn't over just because they had rescued Scarlett.

They had to escape this hellish realm to survive.

Naturally, they couldn't deal with every attack.

The only free hand Ludwig had to fight off the monsters while holding Scarlett was his right hand.

-Thunk! Crack!

-Squeal!

-Screech!

"Urgh…!"

His pace was naturally slower than when he was alone, and his attacks were not as free.

The mages were supporting elsewhere, and the soldiers were struggling to fend off the monsters in front of them.

-Bang! Crash!

Only Delphin's arrows, which flew towards Ludwig and Scarlett as she approached to save them, provided any assistance.

Without that, they would have already been swept away by the monsters and buried alongside Scarlett.

Receiving support fire, Ludwig took one step at a time, kicking and crushing the

approaching monsters, struggling to escape the swarm.

But inevitably, Ludwig had blind spots.

There were overly large monsters, but also smaller ones, which were relatively harder to spot.

Just when they were almost out of the monster wave.

Ludwig noticed a small snake flying towards him from the side too late.

A small snake.

Ludwig discovered it a little late, but it wasn't that he didn't react.

"...!"

-Thwack!

Just before the small snake bit him, Ludwig caught it with his right hand.

But not by the head, rather a little further down.

If a snake's head isn't held, it will bite.

"Damn!"

-Thwack!

A small size didn't mean its attack was less deadly.

The sharp fangs of the small snake pierced Ludwig's Magic Body Strengthening.

And then.

"Argh!"

Ludwig couldn't help but groan at the intense foreign sensation invading through the wound and the burning pain in his nerves.

"Ludwig!"

Delphin, who saw Ludwig bitten from afar, turned pale.

"Ugh!"

-Whip!

Ludwig swung the snake like a whip a few times, and it soon fell away, but the bitten wound was already poisoned.

"Ugh… Ahhhhh!"

Ludwig couldn't bear the pain from the fangs digging into his palm and the venom seeping in, and he screamed.

But he couldn't stop moving.

-Thump!

Delphin's arrow once again tore through the wave of monsters swarming toward Ludwig and Scarlett.

From a distance, Delphin shot an arrow while watching Ludwig.

“Run!”

Delphin's desperate cry rang out.

Supporting Scarlett with his left hand, Ludwig endured the burning pain in his right hand and moved one step at a time.

Believing that once they reached the rear, they could somehow manage both the wound on his right hand and the unconscious Scarlett.

-Crack! Splatter!

Ludwig, ignoring the graying poison in his hand, broke through the wave of monsters.

The small snake's venom was clearly having a lethal effect on Ludwig's body.

No matter the cost to his arm.

He had to save Scarlett.

If he fell here, if he crumbled under this pain, Scarlett would die.

Gritting his teeth, Ludwig stomped and jumped on the monsters, not relying on his unresponsive right hand. With Delphin's support fire, he raced towards the path, soon escaping the swarm of monsters.

"Ludwig! Are you alright?!"

Delphin's original role was to provide long-range support, including elemental magic, from the rear.

But when she saw Ludwig and Scarlett in danger, she ventured deep into the battlefield.

"I'm, I'm fine. We need to tend to Scarlett quickly…"

"No! Your hand is in bad shape right now…!"

-Whoosh…

Delphin had gone too deep.

Far too deep.

The moment Ludwig and Delphin felt the sky darkening above them.

A massive creature was already leaping towards them.

"Ludwig! Behind…!"

But in an instant, the monster that rushed towards them didn't target Ludwig.

It leaped over Ludwig and attacked, recognizing a more dangerous presence.

-Thwack!

"Gah!"

Ludwig watched as the enormous wolf, with hundreds of eyes, jumped over the wave of monsters and his head, sinking its teeth into Delphin's shoulder.

The blue mana surrounding Delphin's body shattered miserably as the wolf's massive fangs dug in.

-Sizzle!

"Del… phin?"

Delphin's body, crushed under the wolf's powerful bite, disintegrated before his eyes.

Ludwig could only dumbly watch the death that unfolded in an instant.

“Run…”

Coughing up blood and gasping for her last breath, Delphin Izzard mouthed the words with her final strength.

Neither the power of magic, nor Ludwig, nor anything else.

Nothing could stop the massive monster's charge that happened in the blink of an eye.

It was just a moment.

Merely an instant.

But that fleeting moment had taken Delphin Izzard's life all too easily.

CHAPTER 546

The Rear Area of the Battlefield.

"Your Highness, the final inspection is complete."

"We're done here as well."

In a hellish landscape filled with the screams of monsters and humans, the roars of battle, and the sound of drums, there was a relatively peaceful spot.

Duke Saint Owan listened to Adelia's report while looking at the massive mechanical devices scattered chaotically in the rear area.

It wasn't just Adelia and Duke Saint Owan.

The mages of Saint Owan Kingdom were also busily inspecting the enormous mechanical devices, moving to and fro.

"I'm uneasy since we've never tested its operation…"

The Duke stared at the devices, which to an untrained eye, seemed like remnants of some colossal building, with a stern expression.

"I believe it will function properly."

At Adelia's words, the Duke quietly nodded.

Conducting research on the battlefield is an exceedingly difficult task.

After deciding to join the allied forces, the Duke and the mages had been working on this long and arduous project, cutting back on sleep.

Together with the girl who created the genius artifact called Power Cartridge, Adelia.

Talent in magic crafting.

The Duke's daughter had also contributed to the creation of the Power Cartridge, but without Adelia, it would not have been possible.

The Demon King, Reinhardt, had gathered Temple Royal-class children to create an impossible object.

And in less than a year, the object was created.

Moonshine and Power Cartridges.

These were now essential supplies for the allied forces.

The Arc Crystal that Rudina was currently using was one of the modified versions of the Power Cartridge.

Duke Saint Owan had once denied Reinhardt's idea.

However, as the Demon King had said, those two items were created.

As if he had known the future.

Reinhardt had accurately assessed the abilities of the children.

Then, another impossible task.

Having created something small, now something immense.

Something even larger than the world's largest artificial object.

With faith that it was possible, the Duke had devised a plan.

The Emperor approved, and the girl who designed the Power Cartridge fully cooperated.

The Duke proposed to accomplish another impossible feat with the child who created the impossible object, teaching her the knowledge and technology of the Duchy.

And so, after countless trials and errors, experiments, and sleepless nights, it was finally created.

"I hope it can continue to help us in the future…"

"I wish for that as well, Your Highness."

The Duke held a blue orb, while Adelia held a red one.

The weapon was too powerful for just one person to activate.

Duke Saint Owan, the head researcher.

And Adelia, who could be considered the chief researcher.

The artifact would not work unless both activated it together.

"Activating."

It was an artifact that had never been tested, as they only had time for inspections before the Serandia offensive.

No, could this even be called an artifact?

Rumble

Pieces of the massive mechanical device began to float in the air.

It was not a building, but a massive mountain that appeared to be rising.

Crack! Sizzle!

Sparks flew as the mechanical devices connected one by one.

Clank!

Everyone could only stare blankly at the massive body that interlocked with a heavy sound.

A mountain rose.

Amidst an enormous cloud of dust, the massive interlocking components soon formed one shape.

A colossal golem, standing on two huge legs, supporting the earth like a towering mountain.

The immense figure was so tall that even craning one's neck back as far as possible, its height was impossible to gauge.

Adelia gazed at the massive creation and spoke quietly.

"Activation confirmed."

"Since the activation time is short, we cannot waste any time. Deploy it immediately."

"Yes, Your Highness."

-Whirrrrrrr!

The blue magic core embedded in the heart of the colossal weapon began to seethe with energy.

-Fzzzzzt!

As if gradually disappearing, the giant golem's body began to vanish, starting from the tips of its limbs.

The colossal golem's body, enveloped in energy, was not vanishing.

It was teleporting.

In the same rear area.

Redina witnessed the appearance of something as massive as a mountain in the midst of the monster waves attacking Serandia City from the top of the Arc Crystal.

Shrouded in blue energy, something revealed itself.

Redina had already heard that it was about to be activated.

-Whirrrrrrr!

A golem three times larger than the largest monster on the battlefield.

"Is that… the Titan…?"

The ultimate weapon of the allied forces, created through the fusion of Saint Owan Duchy's technology and Adelia's genius.

The colossal golem, Titan.

Incredibly, Redina could barely believe her eyes as she watched the enormous figure perform short-range spatial teleportation.

No, actually, the distance the colossal golem traveled wasn't short at all.

It was merely due to its immense size that the teleportation appeared to be sequential, as if the figure was gradually revealing itself after melting into the fabric of space.

-Groooooowl!

Redina watched, stunned, as the magic cannon that poured from the figure's hand crushed the monsters.

-Groooom!

The monsters not pulverized by the magic cannon were crushed and disappeared beneath the footsteps of the colossal golem.

-Groooooooooom

The Titan turned its gaze towards Serandia City.

With each step, the Titan moved closer to Serandia.

-Thud!

The kneeling Titan aimed its fist, raised high in the sky, towards one of the warp gates spewing monsters, and brought it down with earth-shattering destructive power.

-Groooooooooom

Redina saw it.

The small warp gate shattered and disappeared.

Redina, as if discovering hope amidst despair, clenched her fists and gazed at the Titan's might.

It can be destroyed.

Even by something not human, the warp gate can be destroyed.

At least for now.

"It worked! Cayer! Cayer!"

Although it was not a laughing matter, Redina, having discovered hope, couldn't help but exclaim in joy.

"The Titan destroyed the warp gate!"

Cayer was inside the Arc Crystal's core, unable to witness the scene.

"We can destroy the warp gates with the Titan!"

She shouted, hoping to share even a bit of her joy.

"Hey! Why aren't you answering?!"

There was no way he wouldn't hear her, as they communicated through an internal communication system within the Arc Crystal.

She shouted a third time, but still, there was no response.

Then, Redina noticed that the Arc Crystal's energy reserves were not recharging.

"!"

Suddenly, Redina hurried down from the observation deck of the Arc Crystal and

headed toward its core.

When the girl who descended the tower reached the central power unit of the Arc Crystal, she found Cayer collapsed.

"Ca… Cayer…?"

Redina's face turned pale blue.

The Titan's activation time was, at most, a mere seven minutes.

Operating a golem of that size required an immense amount of magical power, and the Titan, facing a large-scale battle, could no longer afford to delay its completion and was hastily activated.

Because of this, the Titan could only participate in the battle for a very short time compared to the overall scale of the conflict.

But seven minutes.

During that time, the Allied forces could not help but be awestruck by what the Titan could do.

Even in the midst of the ongoing battle, the Titan's prowess created a majestic spectacle that could be seen from anywhere on the battlefield.

A monstrous wave.

A mountainous barrier that blocked and crushed the wave.

Soldiers, commanders, knights, paladins, and even mages.

None could resist feeling a divine power emanating from the massive body of the Titan.

It seemed as if the god of magic had descended upon the world in response to the priests' call, crushing and trampling the monsters.

Perhaps there should be an additional god added to the Five Great Gods.

If the essence of magic could produce such a thing, surely magic itself deserved to be called the one true god of the world.

All could not help but feel a divine presence, even though the crushing force before them was not divine in nature.

-Whoosh!

The Titan slammed its raised fist into the ground.

-Rumble!

As if a meteor had fallen, the ground shook, and the monsters were buried and crushed, visible to the soldiers of the Allied forces.

But divine miracles are not eternal.

-Crack! Crackling!

The miracle of magic that had descended upon the world for seven minutes vanished as it appeared, wrapped in blue light.

Seven minutes is a short time.

However, the efficiency of time varies depending on who is using it.

-Charge! Charge!

The Titan's seven minutes were enough to create a massive hole in the wave of monsters.

-Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Intoxicated by the miracle, the Allied forces began to charge once again towards Serandia.

The monsters had no fear, morale, or tactics.

But that did not make them weaker, nor did it make them stronger.

Only numbers and size.

Those were the two sources of the monsters' strength.

And their numbers had been drastically reduced.

So the outcome was inevitable.

The Allied forces captured Serandia.

"The Battle of Serandia is over, Your Majesty."

"It didn't even last a day… Fortunately."

I was listening to Eleris's report at the top of Lazak.

I could have watched the battle, but the place was surrounded by monsters and the Allied forces were nearby.

I didn't want to provoke either the Allied forces or the monsters into an unnecessary battle by clumsily surveilling the area.

From the moment I launched a preemptive strike, I had decided not to intervene in the battle.

So I stayed in Lazak, with only Eleris sent out.

To be precise, I didn't want to watch countless people die in a situation where I couldn't even lift a finger to help.

I might be driven by impulse and jump into the fray. And if that happened, the situation would spiral out of control.

The Battle of Serandia was over.

With this, the Allied forces achieved one of their objectives.

"Also, it was confirmed that the Titan was activated during this battle."

"How was it?"

“…It's hard to describe with words. It was like watching a mountain move."

The Giant Titan.

It's a rare sight, even in Royal-class garrisons, and Sarkegaar was there as well.

Knowing that the allied forces were working on a war weapon project, one of them was the Titan. Though the war did not focus much on security, magic was inherently mysterious. Therefore, obtaining information wasn't an easy task.

The collaborative work of Adelia and the Archduke. It wasn't that I didn't want to see it with my own eyes. The original work never described such a massive weapon. In the end, it was created due to variables.

The capital of Saint Owan Duchy, Arnaca, and almost all the security forces in the White Palace of Arunaria had been replaced with golems.

Heriett had gone missing, and the Archduke created a huge war weapon called Titan with Adelia, who had been his daughter's friend.

The Titan was one of the derived stories and developments that changed. It was incalculable how many resources the empire had poured into making it.

"The activation time is very short, but if improved, it will play a meaningful role in future battles."

"I guess so."

It was a weapon truly suited for war.

We destroyed the warp gates in advance due to our preemptive strike, so the allied forces had relatively fewer gates and monsters to deal with.

The battle became easier due to the appearance of the Titan.

Considering the power of the allied forces is higher than in the original work, and

even we, who were not supposed to exist, joined them, it could only be seen that dealing with the gate situation is easier than in the original work.

The war ahead would become increasingly difficult, but the situation would be better than in the original work.

However, the incalculable number would still be the same.

Just because countless people survived doesn't mean the number of those who died changed.

What if someone I know had died?

What if someone had experienced something irreversible?

"…"

The allied forces had won.

But, I was afraid to learn the reality of the allied forces.

Above all, I couldn't help but fear the news from the Royal Class.

CHAPTER 547

In the southern part of Riselen, every warp gate in the large city of Serandia had been destroyed.

In the end, the entire army, including the Titans, was nothing more than a distraction.

Ellen Artorius.

Saviolin Turner.

If the forces led by these two were deployed alone, they would be annihilated within the monstrous waves. Due to the countless factors like magic blocking, including spatial movement, quick deployment and escape through magic became increasingly impossible.

Thus, others had to draw the attention of the monsters.

Weaker ones, those who could be replenished even if they died, would become the bait.

In a cruel dichotomy, those who became bait held the attention of the monsters, which even Ellen or Saviolin Turner struggled to handle. They broke through the weakened monster encirclement and destroyed the warp gates with swift operations.

In the end, both the bait and the core forces faced unimaginable dangers.

Of course, the battle did not end with the destruction of all the warp gates.

They had to eradicate the monsters that had already appeared, securing the safety of the surrounding areas before the occupation of Serandia could be considered complete.

There was no rest for powerful individual fighters like Ellen.

Even after all the warp gates in Serandia had been destroyed, they had to leave to clear the monsters swarming around Serandia.

After a long and arduous march, they faced a dreadful battle and ultimately achieved victory.

However, those who had fought the toughest battles still could not rest.

The sounds of monsters' cries and the smoke from burning their corpses still filled various parts of Serandia.

Casualties were inevitable in war. However, the Holy Knight Order, which had gathered all of humanity's remaining strength, was also enlisted.

During and after battles, clergy members had no time to rest, as they were constantly treating the injured.

Those with the power to heal wounds, like Adriana, had to tend to the wounded without rest, even after battles. The Holy Knights could not only heal themselves but also others who were injured.

However, not all wounds could be healed.

To heal those whose lives were critically endangered, a priest capable of performing miracles was needed, and there were not many of them.

Having the power of regeneration and healing did not mean that they could use their powers as if they were omnipotent.

Countless people died in the infirmary.

Priests had no time to lament their lack of power before moving on to tend to other injured soldiers, not even having enough time to properly close the eyes of the deceased.

"Ludwig!"

"…"

"What on earth happened?!"

Members of the Royal Class began to gather.

"Your arm…!"

"…"

Seeing Ludwig's right arm wrapped in bandages where it should have been, Christina stifled her tears and began to sob.

The snake's poison was lethal.

It slowly petrified Ludwig's arm.

Treatment was delayed for Ludwig, and his arm had to be amputated to prevent the poison from spreading and endangering his life.

However, what was important to Ludwig was not that.

Someone was missing from this place.

Though it was impossible to know who would not return safely, there was someone they knew would not return.

There was still time to deliver the news that no one knew yet.

"Delphin… she's dead…"

"What…?"

Upon hearing Ludwig's words, those gathered fell silent.

A moment of shock.

Then, silence.

"No… it can't be…"

"He died… trying to protect me and Scarlet…"

Ludwig mumbled in a daze.

The snake's venom was lethal. Before finding a priest, Ludwig realized that if the poison spread from his arm to his neck, it would mean death.

So Ludwig cut off his arm.

With his own hands.

Carrying the unconscious Scarlett, Ludwig retreated to the rear of the battlefield in search of priests, his arm severed by his own doing.

Unable to even take revenge on the monster that had killed Delphin Izzard.

He had no choice but to turn away, tears streaming down his face, as the monster devoured Delphin's fallen body and rampaged through the battlefield.

He couldn't lose Scarlett too, so Ludwig retreated.

No, he fled.

Scarlett sat huddled in a corner of a tent, her hands covering her face, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Because of me… because of me…"

The Royal Class students, witnessing the inconsolable Scarlett and the absent-minded Ludwig, couldn't help but cry as well.

Crying people.

And Ludwig, unable to cry, stood still, gazing blankly at the ground.

Scarlett had appeared to save Ludwig when he was in danger.

Consequently, Scarlett fell into danger, and Delphin saved her.

Ludwig had rushed in to save Scarlett, who had fallen in the middle of the battlefield.

In the end, Delphin, who had ventured too deep into the battlefield for support, lost

her life to a monster's surprise attack.

He couldn't even fight back.

Because he was weak.

It was all because of weakness.

"It's… all my fault for being weak…" Ludwig muttered blankly.

"It's all my fault… for being weak…"

Ludwig, having lost his right arm, stared blankly into the void.

There were priests who could perform miracles to reattach severed limbs, but none who could restore lost body parts.

Thus, those who became physically disabled could not be healed.

Having lost his right arm, Ludwig could no longer fight.

He could force himself to fight using only his left hand, but it would be drastically different from before.

A tremendous number of deaths had occurred, including those from the Temple, just as many others had died.

The 20,000 deaths might not have been a significant loss compared to the hundreds of thousands of soldiers in the alliance.

However, the fights ahead would only grow more daunting.

Nobody could predict how many more would die in the battles to come.

Although the damage had been reduced thanks to unexpected help, in the end, not everyone could survive.

There were bound to be casualties among the elite Royal Class students, just as

Ludwig had lost an arm and others from the Temple had died.

The scale of the battle was just that large.

Those who had corpses left behind were fortunate because at least they could have a funeral.

No matter how much time passed, some would never return.

Accepting their deaths calmly was the reality they had to face.

In a medical tent reserved for the relatively important, Redina stared down at the unconscious patient by the bedside, her face pale.

The teacher who had once taught magic-related courses in the Temple, including magic sensing and strengthening, looked at Redina and asked in surprise.

"Did you not know…?"

"No… I had no idea…"

"It seems Cayer didn't tell you on purpose."

"…"

All Redina could do was stare blankly at Cayer's ashen-white face.

In the aftermath of the battle, the garrison was engulfed by an atmosphere of victory and grim death, and this tent was no exception.

How much time had passed?

"Ugh…"

"…"

As Cayer raised his eyebrows and regained consciousness, Redina bit her lip.

Cayer had suddenly lost consciousness, and seeing his condition upon waking, he seemed to realize what had happened, his expression growing tense.

"Did… did I pass out?"

"Yes."

"Ah, I did my best, but… Why now, of all times… I didn't want this to happen…"

Cayer had expected Redina, who was always nagging and pushing him, to lose her temper and create a fuss as usual, so his face turned pale.

That's how it had always been.

Moreover, he had lost consciousness during a crucial battle and failed to properly use the Arc Crystal.

In fact, after sending Cayer to the medical doctor, Redina had used up all the remaining energy of the Arc Crystal, rendering her unable to help any further in the battle.

Naturally, there was nothing to say.

If he hadn't passed out, who knew how many more lives could have been saved.

Cayer, too, thought that he was pathetic for passing out, and that Redina was justified in being angry.

Yet Redina's expression was unusually stern.

Cayer cautiously swallowed his saliva, wondering what she would say.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"…What?"

Redina was angry.

But this time, it was a little different.

"Teacher said that you would die if you pushed yourself too hard."

"…"

Cayer could not help but close his mouth at those words.

However, Redina stared at Cayer and spoke.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Though he possessed a vast pool of mana and an extraordinary recovery rate, there were limits.

And Redina, who could use up even the most immense power in an instant, was no exception.

Cayer had collapsed from exhaustion several times. But Redina hadn't realized that it had been at the cost of his life force.

She was oblivious to the fact that her constant scolding, demands, and violent behavior had been consuming Cayer's life.

"Did you… really want to make me… such a terrible person? All you had to do was say something. No matter how insane I've been to you, if I knew you were doing all that… would I have kept acting like that? Why… why didn't you tell me?"

Redina's lips trembled as she sobbed.

She had only just realized, far too late, the wrongs she had committed and the pressure she had imposed.

Cayer had never told Redina that he was dying.

He hadn't mentioned that in order to draw more power beyond his limits, he was consuming his own life force.

Cayer silently looked at Redina.

"It's not just you who feels sorrow for the dying."

"…"

"If you knew this, you would have unnecessary thoughts during battles."

He was only doing what was necessary to save someone else who would otherwise die, even if it meant shortening his own life.

"It's just… how it is."

If Redina began to realize that the power she was using was not just simple mana, but a force created by chipping away at Cayer's life, she would undoubtedly start to worry.

Even now, some units were receiving support while others were being abandoned.

From Redina's perspective, if the number of people sacrificed due to the aftereffects of magic was deemed smaller than the number of people that could be saved by that magic, then that was the course of action to take.

If Redina had to take into account Cayer's life on top of that, she would have to give up even more.

Just as Redina had scolded Cayer for the sake of the people's lives, Cayer had also withheld the truth from Redina for the sake of the people's lives.

"I'm not going to die just yet."

Cayer tried to speak without hesitation, while Redina clenched her teeth, her eyes wide and filled with tears.

"Stop talking nonsense…"

Their relationship as senior and junior had become deeply strained.

Both were absolute to each other, yet they resented each other.

"If you die, I'll become useless. Your life is worth more…"

"It's the Arc Crystal that would become useless."

At Cayer's self-deprecating words, Redina's eyes widened.

"Why do you speak like that?"

"You always said it, didn't you? That as long as there's a power cartridge, it doesn't matter if I'm not there. That I'm just an efficient power cartridge."

Their relationship, built on resentment and harsh words, had already crumbled.

Anger, injustice, and frustration had turned every word spoken in excess into indelible scars.

"It's a good thing, isn't it, for a lowly person who can't even use magic to save lives by shaving off a bit of his lifespan?"

Amid Redina's harsh words, Cayer was not alright.

He couldn't be.

Cayer's self-loathing had already reached its peak.

Seeing Cayer like this, Redina shed tears of regret.

"I… I didn't mean… I didn't mean to say that… I didn't know. I really didn't. I was… I was bad. I was wrong. I was bad. I went too far with you. I'm sorry… I'll apologize. So please, don't talk like that… Don't push yourself… I'm sorry… I'm so sorry… Oh… I'm sorry…"

"Be quiet."

"…"

"Let's just continue as we have been."

Regardless of what lay between them.

Regardless of how they thought of each other.

"Like I said, I'm not going to die just yet."

Now, it had become irreversible.

CHAPTER 548

Bertus usually traveled between the Imperial Army and the allied forces.

However, this time was special, so Bertus watched the battle from beginning to end.

Despite the objections of those who insisted that he should return to the Imperial Army due to the danger, Bertus watched everything.

He saw monsters sweeping across the battlefield, numerous spells, and the fallen monsters and humans.

"6 minutes and 47 seconds…"

And he saw the first activation of the Titan.

Standing before Bertus were Archduke Saint Owan, the head researcher, and Adelia, who played a decisive role in the design of the Titan.

Both had not yet heard of the incident that had befallen their classmates.

"Considering the entire war, it's such a short time, but it's amazing how the situation can turn in just that amount of time… No, I wonder if that's what war is all about."

"…"

"I will try to extend the activation time, Your Majesty…"

Adelia spoke anxiously with a pleading voice in front of Bertus.

"I'm not blaming you. It was great. No, it was brilliant. If the Titan is operated for too long and suffers fatal permanent damage, that's a bigger problem. On the contrary, I think it's better to operate it for such a short time."

"Is, is that so…"

"We don't have the resources to make another Titan. If the Titan is destroyed, there

won't be a next one."

It was a project that was no different from betting the fate of the empire.

An enormous amount of resources had been invested in creating a war weapon of that level, which would never have been allowed even during the empire's heyday.

Because the fate of humanity was at stake in this war, it was only possible to entrust full authority to a magician who was barely twenty years old, even with great achievements.

Regarding magical materials, the reality was that the empire now lacked the resources to create even a golem half the size of the existing Titan.

That's why, if the Titan was operated for a long time and permanently destroyed, it could not be recreated.

Adelia, who thought that if the activation time was a little longer, more people could have been saved, couldn't help but be depressed by Bertus's words.

Materials are more important than people.

The Titan is not human.

However, in reality, if they had to exchange a division of the allied forces for the Titan, they would have to do so.

War weapons are more important than humans in reality.

Bertus's words that it was more important to keep the Titan intact until the end of this war than to save people by operating it for a long time implied a cruel logic that was both a harsh reality and undeniable.

Bertus stared at Archduke Saint Owan, not the depressed Adelia.

"What is the damage rate?"

"About 14% of the external frame was damaged."

At those words, Bertus furrowed his brow.

"Is it that much?"

It had only been activated for just under 7 minutes.

No matter how fierce the short battle was, Bertus couldn't help but find it distasteful that the Titan had been damaged so much.

"The Titan was designed to be divided into an inner and outer armor. The Titan is in a state of wearing a kind of buffer frame that covers the core frame with an outer armor. As long as there is no damage to the internal frame, the external frame can be damaged as much as necessary and automatically repaired. You can think of it as wearing a plate armor that can automatically recover."

“…Thank goodness it can be repaired."

The golem was designed for long-term operation rather than short bursts, and due to its immense size, it was at risk of collapsing under its own weight.

This is why the Titan's exoskeleton serves as a practical buffer zone and can automatically repair itself. Upon hearing this, Bertus breathed a sigh of relief.

It was a weapon project that had taken their all, and it would be a loss if it could only be used a few times.

"Anyway, I hope both of you continue to maintain and improve the Titan."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Yes, sir!"

Hearing their replies, Bertus took his seat.

"Your Grace, please have a quick chat with me."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Adelia left, and only the Duke of Saint Owan remained in Bertus's tent.

From far away, the howls of monsters could be heard.

The occupation of Serandia was not yet over. It would take about three more days for the troops to have proper rest.

They needed to secure their surroundings, ensure safety, and establish a garrison.

The end of the long march and battle did not come easily.

"…"

"…"

Bertus, who had suggested they talk, remained silent for a while, listening to the sounds outside.

The Duke of Saint Owan was also silent.

"Your Grace, do you think the Titan could have been built better if Harriet were here?"

"…"

"What do you think?"

At the sudden mention of his youngest daughter, the Duke stared at the emperor.

Neither smiling nor frowning, he maintained a neutral expression.

Harriet de Saint Owan.

It was as sensitive a topic as the Demon King himself, and even more so for the Duke.

The Duke had to bear a lot because of what his youngest daughter had done.

Neither the Emperor nor the Duke showed any emotion at the mention.

The Duke was never very expressive to begin with, but he spoke even less after his daughter disappeared with the Demon King.

The Emperor's question.

The Titan.

And the presence of the youngest daughter.

"I don't know."

That was all the Duke had to say.

"I cannot say what you mean by 'built better.' If you mean that it would have a longer operating time, more weapons, or a sturdier inner and outer skeleton, then perhaps it could be. However, I don't know if we could call it better built if, as you said, it gets damaged after prolonged use."

At the Duke's words, Bertus laughed.

"Perhaps the Titan does not need improvement."

"If you think this is an excuse from an incompetent engineer, there's nothing I can do about it."

"Not at all. I have no reason to think that, do I?"

Bertus leaned back, crossing his arms.

"The reason I bring up such a sensitive matter is that I would like to give you all the medals you deserve."

The Emperor clicked his tongue briefly.

"I can give them to Adelia, but I cannot give them to you, Your Grace, or any of the mages of the dukedom."

"I am aware, Your Majesty."

The sin committed.

Even though they might wonder if it should be considered a sin, people view it as such.

The Titan wasn't made by Adelia alone, but it would be considered as if she did.

Everyone knows that the technology of the Duke and the Dukedom of Saint Owan was involved, but it will be seen as providing technology to repay their sins.

The Duke wasn't resentful or angry about it. He never had any interest in such things in the first place.

"Only after the war is over can we discuss rewards and promotions. What meaning is there in having such a conversation now? But I felt compelled to mention that, even with such contributions, we cannot grant you a medal, and if people knew that one of the keys to this weapon lies in your hands, many would be terrified."

"I see."

At the Archduke's indifferent response, Bertus blankly stared at the tent ceiling.

"Terrified people do strange things. If used and gathered properly, an empire could be formed… But when people know a murderer lives in the neighboring house, they might gather and set fire to it."

"Like how we invaded Darkland, regardless of whether they attacked humanity."

"Whether or not the neighbor is a murderer, isn't it possible they'd set fire?"

"Similarly."

"Whether you are a collaborator of the Demon King or not, people might set fire to your tent, to the Saint Owan Duchy."

"The Allied Forces saw the Titan crush the monster today, and they know one of the keys is in your hands."

"Your Grace."

"Be cautious of terrified people."

"I apologize that this is all I can say."

Terrified people.

Those who once revered the Archduke now fear him.

Terrified humans drove innocent people into the Demon God Cult and slaughtered them during the cult's raid.

The Archduke is resented because the Demon King's whereabouts are unknown, and the whereabouts of his youngest daughter who followed the Demon King are also unknown.

The Archduke had no reason or thoughts to explain the many rumors.

Until now, the Archduke has been a great help in the war. And today, he was a decisive help.

But the weight of that help is too great, and people are now afraid of the Archduke.

Titan.

They will be afraid of what would happen if it were to step on the Allied Forces.

Because the Archduke might have other thoughts.

Terrified people, intoxicated with fear, might say or do strange things.

The Emperor warned of this.

There are no rewards.

In the end, it is only a gathering of criminals.

"You may return to the Duchy if you wish."

"I must leave the key to Titan behind."

“…Yes, it cannot be helped."

The Emperor cannot grant the Archduke a reward but offers him an opportunity.

The opportunity to retreat from this war.

No one recognizes the Archduke's honor anyway.

Now it will even become dangerous. Thus, he offers the chance to retreat to those who would only receive fearful, contemptuous, or hateful gazes from others.

The Allied Forces would rather welcome it.

The Archduke, who created a dangerous weapon, would retreat on his own.

Although this would weaken the power, and other mages would steal the achievements of Titan with their eyes wide open in the Saint Owan Duchy.

What use is everything in the face of death? Material and intellectual gains are secondary.

With a significant accomplishment in history, he can now return home, unable to gain even honor in a life-risking battle.

From the Emperor's perspective, who needs to preserve even a little power, this is a huge concession.

The Archduke's hesitation was brief.

"Your Majesty, I know many people resent me."

"I also know many people fear me."

"Until now, how many countless angers, hatreds, and contemptuous words have I received from such people? I have never refuted, responded to, or explained their words."

But it wasn't as though he admitted to having a sin by not refuting it.

Duke Saint Owan looks at Emperor Bertus.

"I do not serve in the military to pay for my sins, and I have never thought that way."

"…"

Many people talk about the Duke's mistakes, sins, and wrongdoings.

But just because he didn't refute them doesn't mean he admitted to having a sin.

"I don't have even a slight sense of guilt," the Duke says confidently.

"Unjust hatred and blame for sins cannot influence my decisions in the slightest. Honor exists within me, and I alone can judge whether it has been damaged."

"Your Majesty, even if they hate and fear me through some delusion, I only act according to my honor and beliefs. I didn't join the war to repay the sins of my youngest daughter, just as I didn't create the Titans."

"I serve in the military only because I believe it is right."

"As long as the purpose of war is not wrong, I and my soldiers will hold our ground."

"It has been a long-standing family teaching, and although not always, I only follow it."

Walk the righteous path.

Because he has deeply established the concept of righteousness in his heart, Duke Saint Owan says he has no intention of being swayed by the world's words and principles.

The Emperor looks at him quietly, with an attitude that cannot be denied as arrogant.

As long as one doesn't admit to one's own mistakes, they are not wrong, nor are they sins.

No matter what the world's demands, one does not walk the path someone else tells them to walk if they believe it is right.

That is the long-standing teaching of the family.

This war is just.

That is why he serves in the military, holding his ground with no wrongdoing or guilt in his heart.

Because it is right.

Indeed.

No matter how the world looks at him, how it judges his actions. Wasn't Harriet de Saint Owan, who followed Reinhardt, displaying the exact same attitude?

"If that is your decision, I am pleased, but I cannot promise that I will be able to protect you and your soldiers."

"It's fine, Your Majesty."

As if it was something he would take care of himself, the Duke showed no sign of disappointment at the emperor's words.

Bertus gave the Duke a chance, but he threw it away himself.

It was a decision made based on his own beliefs, so if any consequences befall him, the Duke faces the outcome of his choice. Bertus feels there will be no reason for the Duke to blame himself, no matter what happens.

"It seems our conversation has come to an end. I look forward to continuing to work together."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The Duke's business is his own.

If one cannot handle their own affairs, they will die blaming their own incompetence.

Should he be called a mallet? Or a person with unwavering faith and pride?

The Emperor no longer offered any other options to this person who deserved to be called stubborn. From the start, he wouldn't listen.

A truly aristocratic attitude.

Bertus found it strangely unfamiliar, having seen it after so long.

"One last thing."

"…"

As the Duke was about to leave, Bertus called him back one last time.

"May I ask one more impertinent question?"

"Yes."

Bertus wanted to ask.

"Do you think you raised your daughter wrong, Your Grace?"

He was a person who did not mix the world's opinions with his own judgments.

Bertus was curious how the Duke thought about his missing daughter.

The Duke claimed he felt no guilt.

Did he think that his daughter's sins were her own and not his?

Did he truly believe that his daughter had not committed any sins?

Bertus was curious.

"…"

The Duke was silent for a while, his back turned.

Finally, in a calm tone, the Duke spoke.

"I might have raised her wrong."

Bertus couldn't help but be slightly surprised by these words, as he hadn't expected the Duke to say that.

"However, she didn't grow up to be a bad person."

But the Duke's following words were even more surprising.

"Ha, haha… Hahaha…"

It was not something one should say in front of the emperor. It was a sensitive

statement that could cause significant political problems in many ways. It was no different from saying that his daughter, who had followed the Demon King, was right.

The Duke believed that what he had heard from his daughter was the truth.

She would make the same choice and regret it if she were born again or returned to that moment, just like the day the sky opened.

He believed her words wholeheartedly.

He was convinced that his daughter, who had grown up to be someone who could say such things, could not have been raised wrong.

"In fact… I think so too."

After hearing that bombshell, Bertus laughed emptily and agreed with the Duke's words.

CHAPTER 549

Four days had passed since the occupation of Serandia.

The alliance's base was an odd mix of elation and celebration for victory, as well as despair and sorrow for the dead.

Praises for the victorious and mourning for the fallen resounded simultaneously from every corner.

The alliance had no choice but to halt not only to endure the winter but also to deal with the aftermath of the battle.

The recovered bodies had to be identified, sent to their respective armies, and given proper funerals.

However, Delphin Izzard's body was not among them.

From the outset, it had been a battle where far more bodies couldn't be found than those that could.

-Dagak

After securing the safety of Serandia's surroundings without properly resting, Ellen, Saviolin Turner, and Heinrich, along with the alliance's elite, finally returned.

"Rest, Heinrich. The alliance will spend the winter in Serandia," said Louise von Schwarz.

Having reached the Master Class, it was natural for Louise to deal with the monsters and return only now.

"Sister… Can I go see my friends for a while…?" asked Heinrich.

Louise looked at Heinrich silently.

Friends.

He wanted to confirm his friends' safety in this war.

It would be difficult to handle even if someone's death was confirmed.

"Sometimes it's better not to know…”

But Louise stopped herself from saying more.

She didn't want to treat him like a child.

Whatever had happened, he would find out eventually.

What good would it do to learn about it later?

"Alright, you need to see for yourself. There's plenty of time, so you can stay there for a few days."

“…Thank you."

Death was everywhere, and even at the Kernstadt military command, they had to face it.

"But, Sister… Won't you rest?"

At Heinrich's hesitant question, Louise shook her head.

"As a commander, I have duties to fulfill."

Despite being directly involved in the battle, Louise had many responsibilities and people to take care of.

Now that she had killed her two brothers with her own hands, there was even more to do.

Louise gazed at the corpses scattered throughout Serandia and its surroundings, even noticing a strange, massive crater.

Everyone knew something was off, but no one dared to question the high command.

What were those traces?

Who had caused the massive destruction that was already present when the alliance arrived?

"…"

Louise returned to the Kernstadt army base with her knights.

There were those whose deaths had been confirmed by sight.

A second-year student, Delphin Izzard, had died.

A first-year student, Cardina Ein, A-10, had died.

However, even if someone's death wasn't confirmed by sight, if they didn't return for a long time, they were assumed dead.

That was the case for Ard de Gritis, a third-year student.

Ard, who had dueled with Reinhardt, now the Demon King, hadn't returned even days after the battle's end.

The third-year students, including Adriana and Redina, waiting for their long-absent classmate, couldn't help but cry when they learned of Ard's death.

“He'll come back! He could be at another base! Why do you think he's dead! He might not be!”

“Redina… Please…”

As Redina shed tears of hatred for the world, Adriana also sobbed, holding Redina and choking back her cries.

Adriana, who could not accept Ard's heart, had once left the temple.

However, though she couldn't accept his heart, Adriana valued Ard as both a dear friend and comrade.

His death was unbearably painful.

The Royal Class was small in number, and most of them were skilled fighters, so there were no further casualties or missing persons.

It was inevitable that there would be casualties among the lower grades.

Three first-year students had already died in this war, and with the death of Cardina Ein in this battle, their number was now the lowest among all grades.

Due to the small number of the Royal Class, the death of someone felt even more devastating.

Under the guidance of teachers and priests, the funeral was held.

Except for Cardina Ein, the bodies of Delphin Izzard and Ard de Gritis, could not be found.

Ludwig knew from the moment he saw her die that he would not be able to find Delphin's body.

Finding Delphin's torn body would be an even more horrifying task.

Delphin, who had awakened the rare power of spirit magic – a unique power in the world – had met an absurdly tragic death.

As such, no one was safe on this battlefield.

Some wept at the death of someone, feeling the strange fate that they, too, might someday face death.

Ludwig, with a bandage where his right arm used to be, stared blankly at the funeral.

Scarlett, too, sat down and cried as she watched the funeral without a body.

Hiccup! Ugh! Hiccup!

Christina and Louis Ancton tried to comfort Scarlett, who was gasping for breath and panting.

Scarlett was as miserable as Ludwig.

Although the process began with Scarlett saving Ludwig, he lost his arm while trying to save her when she was unconscious, and eventually, Delphin lost her life.

It was inevitable that Scarlett would blame herself for everything.

Scarlett, overcome with guilt, even attempted to strangle herself in her dormitory, but Ellen rushed in to stop her just in time.

And so.

There were those who could no longer fight because they had died.

There were those who could no longer fight because of irreversible injuries.

Ludwig belonged to the latter group.

With his arm lost, Ludwig stared blankly at the hollow funeral.

Delphin Izzard.

She was one of the first friends Ludwig had made, along with Ranian Sesor.

Ranian Sesor stared at the funeral, where not even a body was present, with empty eyes.

Everyone was precious, but some people were particularly cherished.

Ludwig spent the most time with Delphin and Ranian.

They had traveled together, and though they had their disagreements, they were ultimately the most precious people to him.

He had lost one of them.

Because he was weak.

He lost her because he was weak.

Ludwig and Scarlett would have died in that battle if it weren't for Delphin.

In trying to save each other, someone had to die in the end.

Ludwig stared blankly at the faces of the people watching the funeral.

Heinrich von Schwarz, who had been transferred to the Kernstadt army, also attended the funeral, looking solemnly at the funeral scene.

If it had been Heinrich, he could have saved Scarlett in an instant by destroying the giant monster's waist with an explosion the moment it appeared. If Scarlett had fallen in the middle of the monsters, he could have obliterated the area and brought Scarlett out with him.

No, from the beginning, the monster that oppressed the mind could have been annihilated with a single gesture.

It didn't need to be a supernatural.

Even an outstanding mage could do it.

This situation only arose because the mages' support from the rear had ceased.

It wasn't the mages' fault. They must have been saving people elsewhere since they couldn't support there.

It didn't even have to be magic.

If it were Ellen, she would have swiftly cleaved the monsters with her divine sword.

It didn't need to be a hero with a divine sword.

If only he had reached the Master Class.

If he could have just imbued his sword with aura or resisted a little longer.

It wasn't the fault of those who didn't help.

Someone died and another was injured trying to save him, so it was all his fault.

Because he was weak.

Being weak is a sin.

Not wielding violence in a battlefield where violence prevails means that the scale of violence he could exert was far too weak to protect anything.

Thus, it is a sin.

Everything is my fault.

Ludwig looks at his empty right arm.

Being weak is a sin.

Now, even weaker.

"…"

Without a right arm, Ludwig can still use his Magic Body Strengthening, but he can't do everything he's learned and experienced as well as before.

He lost because he was weak, and now weaker, he will lose even more.

No, now it may even be impossible to participate in battle.

Is this the end?

He had endured the misery of running away and turning a blind eye to his friend's death to save his friend.

Must he become even more miserable?

He tried, but it couldn't be helped.

This is my limit.

It's over because I lost my arm.

Now it's the end.

No.

Is that really true?

Suddenly.

Ludwig recalls a phrase he heard long ago.

"Doing your best is like preparing an excuse for defeat. Even though I worked hard. I'll do better next time. Isn't it creating a way to escape for the defeated self?"

The root cause of this whole situation.

The days when he thought that guy was just a hard worker.

Perhaps, those days when he could even say he admired him.

On the day he asked for guidance, fearing a disadvantage in the tournament, the Demon King had said that.

Ludwig didn't know whether the Demon King was hiding his power or not.

Revenge for all this was not his to take. It's the world where there are many more outstanding people than himself.

Killing monsters was the only thing allowed, and the only thing he could do, but he couldn't even do that and lost Delphin and his right arm.

The Demon King is a hateful existence, and if he could, he would wish for a chance to take revenge on himself, but he doesn't hope for that.

He hates the Demon King.

But those words back then.

The truth was not to make excuses prepared for defeat.

It's over because I lost my arm.

I am limited.

I can't do any more.

Nothing will improve with those words.

Believe, even if you don't get the results, he said.

Fight with the determination to win, even if you lose, he said.

Only then will a slightly better result come out, he said.

Those words, no matter who the Demon King is, cannot be wrong.

So what if the right arm is gone?

There's still the left arm.

He lost Delphin, but if he gives up now, someone else will be lost and he'll have to wallow in another sense of helplessness.

Ludwig takes his eyes off the funeral and stands up.

Then, he headed for the armory, grasping the sword in his left hand.

It was an unfamiliar sensation.

Without his right arm, his body's balance was off.

He wasn't sure if he could fight with just his left arm.

'Well then… '

There was no need for words of effort.

'Reinhardt.'

Ludwig, who awkwardly held the cold and sharp sword, aimed it at the empty air.

At some point, he had returned to that mindset.

To think that someone like me.

Someone of my level.

All I can do is.

Merely this much.

He had reverted to the mindset of a loser who lived with the mentality of defeat.

As his mindset weakened, he had truly become weak.

In the face of great despair and terrifying beings, Ludwig had regressed to the mindset of his past, when he sought only small satisfactions.

That's why he was weak.

He knew he couldn't become strong just by the size of his mindset, but with a small mindset, he could only gain a small amount of power.

In that case, he should think bigger.

Different from before.

Even if the outcome was predetermined, he should aim for something more grandiose.

He may not be able to do everything, but he must think he can do anything.

The root cause of all this.

All this sorrow and hatred, as well as the symbol of despair.

He would discard even the thoughts he had given up on, thinking they were Ellen's role.

Having lost his right arm and left only with the left, Ludwig made up his mind.

He might not be able to face the Demon King.

He might not be able to reach the one who had become a being above the heavens.

Following the words from that time, urging him to make a vow for victory, not excuses for defeat, such excuses were impossible.

No, it wasn't even defeat.

It was an excuse for running away, as he didn't even think he could fight.

He would discard such excuses, such cowardice, and resignation.

'I will… '

While recalling the Demon King's words.

'No.'

While recalling the Demon King's teachings.

'I will.'

Ludwig vowed.

'I will kill you.'

As Ludwig, avoiding the funeral, grasped the sword in his left hand and vowed not to give up, Ellen sat blankly in the barracks.

She couldn't help but learn about the deaths of her classmates and juniors last. She couldn't help but return the latest, as it was Ellen.

The headquarters had declared this battle a great victory.

A tremendous victory.

Not only did they suffer less damage than expected, but the completion of the Titan had also led to fewer casualties in the conquest of Serandia.

If future battles went like this, they might even see the end of the Gate Incident.

However, when confronted with the tragic events hidden behind the victory, Ellen couldn't understand what victory was.

"…"

Someone would die, and such funerals would happen every time they fought.

It was fortunate that fewer had died, an undeniable fact.

But someone would die, and it was inevitable that Ellen's acquaintances would be included.

Unable to face the funeral directly, Ellen had retreated to the barracks.

It wasn't just because she was afraid of facing the deaths of her classmates and juniors.

"If only…"

With both hands covering her face, Ellen muttered quietly.

Having witnessed countless deaths and protected many, Ellen couldn't help but crumble upon facing the news of the deaths of her acquaintances.

"If only I hadn't been there… If I hadn't been… It would have been enough…"

She should have died.

She should have been killed by Lydia Schmitt in the snowstorm at Fortress Epiax.

Due to an extraordinary talent, she achieved the Master Class on the spot.

And so, she survived.

And so, this happened.

If she had been killed there, she wouldn't have pursued Reinhardt's truth, and after exposing him as the true demon king, the situation would have become tangled and the Gate Incident would have exploded.

If she had died in the fortress of Epiax, the truth would never have been revealed, and there would have been no misunderstandings.

Not being able to trust Reinhardt was a sin.

And thus, not dying where she was supposed to die was also a sin.

If she had died in Epiax.

If she hadn't gone to the temple in the first place.

If she hadn't loved Reinhardt.

If she had been indifferent from the beginning and never paid any attention.

Or, if she had only said a word to trust Reinhardt.

There were others who believed in him, despite the seemingly unbelievable situation.

The son of the demon king who died fighting her brother.

It was difficult to trust such a person, but if she had believed in him anyway.

This wouldn't have happened.

All this sorrow and tragedy stemmed from her, and people didn't even know that she was the cause.

Scarlett tried to strangle herself, thinking that all of Delphin's deaths and Ludwig's injuries were her fault, and Ellen stopped her.

She prevented her from ending her life in self-reproach.

But Ellen, witnessing this, realized that she was experiencing an even greater self-reproachful impulse than Scarlett.

Due to an overwhelming sense of guilt, Ellen eventually came to such thoughts.

It would have been better if someone like me hadn't been born.

If I hadn't been born, none of this would have happened, so perhaps my very existence is a mistake.

"If only… If only I didn't exist… I shouldn't have existed…”

Despite stopping Scarlett's self-reproach, Ellen cried out in her own unending self-reproach, alone in the barracks.

The demon king, the hero, the emperor, the princess.

Everyone believed that they were the ones who turned the hourglass of destruction.

As the war intensified, self-reproach could only deepen.

It felt as if I had been hit in the head with a hammer.

"It doesn't make sense."

I couldn't help but be dumbfounded by Sarkegaar's report.

"Could it be a mistake?"

"Your Majesty, I cannot pass on such information carelessly."

The situation of the Royal Class that I heard through Sarkegaar.

Ard, who I had a quarrel with at the beginning of the semester, went missing.

To go missing was to be dead.

And first-year student Cardina Ein had died.

Delphin Izzard had died.

Ludwig lost his right arm.

I was afraid to hear news of the Royal Class, but I couldn't avoid checking.

Delphin should have survived to the end.

Ludwig was supposed to die at the end, but not with an injury that cost him his arm.

I was dumbfounded as I listened to the report.

Someone's death.

And a fatal, irreversible injury.

I knew that the variables made it impossible to know who would live or die.

But to actually feel that through someone's death and a fatal injury was a different matter.

Could something like this happen to Ludwig?

Delphin had died.

Does that mean Ludwig could also die in battle at any moment?

Or has Ludwig now lost his role entirely?

Is it okay for that to happen?

Is it because I possess Alsbringer that Ludwig has gone through this ordeal?

I didn't steal it.

But ultimately, Alsbringer chose me.

And because of that, Ludwig lost his arm.

The one who was supposed to be the protagonist eventually remained in the background of the story and finally became unable to fight any longer.

Have I taken too much away from him?

CHAPTER 550

Delphin Izzard

We weren't close friends, but we were classmates, and ever since the deserted island mission, she had been kind to me. She was someone who was supposed to survive until the end, but one of the main heroines had died. It was such a futile end.

Now that Ludwig had become incapable of fighting, there was a high probability that he would no longer be involved in battles. If, in the original work, Ludwig, who was supposed to lose his life, would survive in a place unrelated to fighting due to this turn of events, would that be a good thing?

Since I've taken on Ludwig's role, shouldn't he be allowed to survive? I couldn't know how Ludwig's vacancy would manifest itself or whether, as it stood, he would lose his role in the war. Or perhaps he would still try to fight.

But in that case, Ludwig would likely die with a high probability. Trying to fight with his left hand after losing his right arm would be foolish. I hoped he wouldn't dream of such a thing, but I couldn't predict how reality would unfold.

I had heard the shocking news about the Royal Class, and in the end, I couldn't be the only one to know. Harriet, Liana, and Charlotte – their expressions couldn't help but darken when they heard the news about the Royal Class.

Upon hearing of Delphin's death and Ludwig's injury, Charlotte cried for a long time. To her, they were classmates from the same B-class, so she couldn't treat their stories as someone else's. Harriet couldn't hold back her tears, and Liana was at a loss for words.

But we couldn't just be sad. We had to move on, and there was too much to do to stand still. We had to swallow our tears.

I consciously tried not to think or mention the events surrounding the Royal Class. Although it wasn't as if we had promised not to mention it, none of us brought it up.

The allied forces would spend the winter in Serandia. We could have resolved the climate issue, but Liana's ability took a toll on her heart every time she used it.

Since we couldn't always help the allied forces, it was fine for them to spend the winter in Serandia. Not only the climate, but they also needed time to reorganize and regroup after the large-scale battle.

One couldn't forget someone's death just because winter passed, but we hoped to overcome it. "For the time being, there will be no activity for the allied forces, so we won't have any either."

It was winter, and if the allied forces didn't move, we wouldn't have a reason to move either. It seemed paradoxical, but even during a war, there would be a few months of rest. The allied forces would take this time to reorganize, upgrade the Titan, and try to quell the shock, fear, and sadness caused by the many deaths.

"Your Highness, do we not need a countermeasure for the Titan?"

"A countermeasure?"

"Yes."

It was Antirianus who spoke. "Only the Lord of Tuesday has seen the Titan directly, but from what I've heard, it's as big as a mountain and can crush hundreds of monsters with just one step. Isn't there a chance that it could turn towards us?"

"First of all, they don't even know our location. Even if they did, would the Titan really be able to cross the ocean and come all the way here?"

Whether the Titan was big enough to walk across the ocean, I couldn't be sure, but it probably couldn't.

"Isn't there always a 'what if' in the world?"

"Hmm…"

Even though we're helping the alliance now, it's true that we don't know when a war might break out.

Suppose I have to fight a Titan.

Me, fighting a golem as massive as a mountain.

Just imagining it makes me feel insignificant.

Come to think of it, there was a similar game.

"I think it wouldn't be bad if we had a weapon similar to a Titan…"

At Antirianus' words, I sighed.

I understood why he would say such a thing.

"You don't just want something like a Titan, do you?"

"…Well, isn't it fascinating? A colossal golem that has never existed in the world before."

Wow.

Looking at the expression on the old man's face, like he's been caught, something seemed to come up from deep within him.

Is this a joke?

No, how can this old man speak of such things with the mindset of approaching a toy, as if he were a child?

Has dementia finally set in?

I had my suspicions, but is it true?

"Harriet, can we make something like a Titan?"

"If we have blueprints and materials, there's nothing we can't make. But we don't have blueprints, and even if we did, we don't have the materials."

"What about using the existing Titan's parts…"

"Shut up, old man. I have no intention of making or stealing something like a Titan."

"What a shame…"

Antirianus seemed to be genuinely disappointed by my response.

"If you suddenly steal control of a Titan and do something like that, I'll make sure you truly experience the feeling of having your neck sliced by a divine sword. Stop fooling around."

At my harsh words, Antirianus chuckled and nodded.

You can't trust this old man to know what he'll do next; it's impossible to feel at ease.

"But Your Majesty, Antirianus' suggestion that we need a countermeasure against the Titan does seem reasonable."

Sarkegaar, who had finally returned to Edina, joined the conversation due to Antirianus' useless remark.

"Why should we fight something like that? It's monsters without intellect that charge at things like that. We have intellect and can think. If a Titan is in front of us, we should flee, not confront it."

"What if a Titan crosses the sea and comes here? We can't abandon this place."

"Why are you like this too, sister!"

"No, am I wrong? I'm right, aren't I?"

In the end, Olivia also deeply sighed, as if she had a mountain of worries.

Although we anticipate that we might clash with the empire in the future, why does everyone accept it as an established fact?

But still…

What if?

Suppose a war breaks out, and the issue of mobilization time is resolved.

Let's say a Titan crosses the continent and attacks Edina.

What then?

Titans would have defensive measures as formidable as their offensive weapons, right?

I can't do anything like cutting down a mountain, and neither can anyone here.

Do we have to smash it with a meteor?

My thoughts shifted towards needing a countermeasure against the Titan as well.

“…Assuming we can't use spatial teleportation, a Titan wouldn't be able to come here either."

The one who gave the answer wasn't me but Charlotte.

“…Huh? Why can't it come?"

"I haven't seen it myself, but the Titan is huge, right?"

"Yes, incredibly so."

"Could such a massive creature really cross the sea properly? It would be fortunate if it isn't swept away by the currents and shattered. Don't underestimate the sea."

“…Is that so?"

"Besides, we have merfolk."

"What do merfolk have to do with the titan?"

"Merfolk can manipulate ocean currents."

“…Huh? Really?"

“…You didn't know?"

I had never heard of this before.

Charlotte seemed incredulous that I didn't know.

"I heard that the reason our journey from Edina to Port Mokna has been smooth so far is largely thanks to the merfolk. They couldn't control the weather, but they helped our navigation by manipulating the currents."

I hadn't met the merfolk directly, so I thought they just caught fish for us, but that wasn't the case.

Charlotte seemed to have learned facts I didn't know, since she was focused on governing Edina. The demons recognized her as the Demon King, so she must have been treated as my equal.

Merfolk… they weren't just pretty faces.

They could use magic-like abilities like the succubi.

Impressive.

I chose a good ally.

Of course, it was my problem that I didn't know what I should have known.

"Anyway, if the titan tries to cross the sea and attack us, the merfolk will subdue it. It probably won't be able to come via teleportation in the first place."

Antirianus seemed to have considered capturing the titan, and Sarkegaar and Olivia seemed relieved that a titan attack wouldn't happen.

"Anyway, let's prepare ourselves until the allied forces depart. We still have to consider what to do if they suffer a food shortage, though it hasn't happened yet…"

The allied forces need to manage a huge group for a long time, so they might face food shortages.

If that happens, we don't know how much help we can provide.

While the allied forces are spending time on preparations, we need to find something to do.

"Reinhardt, we need to strengthen our forces too."

"Strengthen our forces?"

It was Olivia's question.

"More like replenishment than strengthening. We used up many Death Knights during the Serandia campaign."

Death Knights.

Olivia, who could handle Kier's divine power, could summon Death Knights. They were a significant force during the pre-emptive attack on Serandia.

"Couldn't you summon them anytime?"

“…What?"

Wow.

I haven't seen that expression in a long time.

A genuinely disdainful expression.

"Of course, replenishing the Death Knights is possible. We can summon them anytime. But ultimately, the base is important, right?"

"The base?"

"That's right. Would a Death Knight made from Reinhardt be stronger, or would one made from that little weakling over there be stronger?"

“…Stop talking nonsense, will you?"

"Let's get to the point. That weak little guy wouldn't even be suitable for a Death Knight. Maybe a tiny, pale, frail skeleton would come out? It would be cute, though."

Harriet squinted her eyes at the creepy sound of that.

A Death Knight made from me.

A Death Knight made from Harriet.

I don't like thinking about it, but the outcome would be obvious.

"Before the Demon God Cult was under our control, some chose the path of becoming a Death Knight themselves. The Death Knight we saw before was one of those cases."

“…Yes, that must be the case."

Indeed, when we brought the Demon God Cult members, several Death Knights also joined.

Integrating them into the Holy Order was no easy task, fraught with many headaches.

The followers of the Demon God Cult had engaged in many unthinkable and outrageous acts, unacceptable by societal norms.

Various measures had been taken to eliminate this noise.

And then, a significant number of the Death Knights were purged during that time.

Their ominous appearance was one thing, but their excessively long existence made it impossible to change their ways.

"So the Death Knights I summon are either those without a sense of self or those who have perished."

These beings are, quite literally, undead, with no other purpose than to obey commands.

The Death Knights with consciousness were purged, and those that remained, who had lost their consciousness, had become almost machine-like. These were the Death Knights that Olivia summoned.

The power of corruption, Death Knights who answered its call.

"Anyway, Death Knights don't just come out of the ground. Well, they do come out of the ground, but if ten of them were used up today, that's it. They're gone."

"So, we need reinforcements, right?"

"Of course. And naturally, it's better to create powerful Death Knights."

Olivia folded her arms and nodded.

"Of course, it's not impossible to create Death Knights by force with Kier's power, but it's better to have excellent basic conditions."

My sister.

She's starting to sound no different than an evil dark mage.

"So we need good ingredients?"

Whether it's the right term or not, if it's not ingredients, what is it?

It's just a bit creepy since it refers to corpses.

"Surely you're not planning to use the dead from the Serandia campaign as material… to create Death Knights…?"

Harriet looked at Olivia with a disgusted expression.

The others' expressions were not much different from Harriet's.

Even Antirianus stared at Olivia with his mouth wide open, which said it all.

What a genius idea! They were astonished and puzzled.

Many people had died. And many of them were exceptional.

It was obvious that using their corpses as material would create outstanding Death Knights.

But wasn't that too cruel, regardless of whether it was possible or not?

"Well, I did consider that, but I think it's going to be difficult."

She was planning to do it if it was possible…

"First of all, it's crazy to perform the ritual to create Death Knights in a place

swarming with allied forces. And they probably won't be able to bury that many corpses, so they'll inevitably cremate them, right? What do you think, Sir Sarkegaar?"

Sarkegaar showed no reaction to being called "sir." It was as if he didn't care.

But isn't Sarkegaar currently in the form of a lady?

Why is my sister always so twisted?

"Actually, that's what's happening. Most are choosing cremation for the funerals. There are cases where corpses are sent to the imperial capital for burial, but it's rare."

Sarkegaar's confirmation prompted Olivia to nod her head.

"How could I raise the ashes of the burnt corpses? It's possible if forced, but the result would be weak and uncertain. Anyway, I can't risk my life doing that in a place constantly garrisoned by both the allied forces and the Holy Knights."

"That's true…"

Amidst the grieving for the dead, the deceased rise as Death Knights?

And there's someone who would do that?

It's no different than advertising for someone to kill her.

Given the environment of the alliance's garrison, which is forced to resort to cremation, and the excessive number of people, creating Death Knights could be a dangerous endeavor.

That's why it's impossible to do such a thing in Serandia.

"So, do you have a place in mind?"

Where on earth does she plan to find the materials, regardless of whether it's possible or not?

At my question, Olivia grins.

"The royal mausoleum."

What?

What did I just hear?

"There are many war heroes and great figures resting there. Let's raise a few and put them to use."

"Wha-What?! What on earth are you saying?!"

Charlotte's complexion turns pale as she jumps to her feet.

"Well, who would want to raise weak and useless royalty or the imperial dukes? I'm talking about raising the helpful ones."

"But still! That's… that's just…!"

Charlotte's face grows increasingly pale, unable to accept the idea.

"Ugh…"

This is like…

If you think about it…

It's like looting a war memorial… That kind of story?

Not exactly looting, but something more malicious… that kind of…

At Charlotte's horror, Olivia shrugged her shoulders.

"Come on, the end of humanity is near, so what difference do heroes or great figures make? They should spring up when called. They'd even be happy about it. Where else can they find the glory of saving humanity even after death? They should be grateful to me."

"Crazy… woman…"

Harriet shook her head in disgust.

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